

CASABARACCA: TRACING THE ORIGIN OF THE SHACK AS POPULAR, INFORMAL AND “RESISTANT” DWELLING

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Abstract

This paper is a result of an ethnography and historical research carried out in Casablanca during the last three years. It is an attempt to investigate the origin of the most spread model of informal settlements in Morocco: the shack.

Focusing on the French colonial context, the shack has been used for different purposes in the urban landscape, from military needs to occupy and control the land and for housing demand. In fact, as the documents of the national archives report, the first HBM (low-income settlements) implemented in Casablanca during the 20's, to house local administrators and managers, consisted exactly of blocks of shacks, bunkhouses, a prefabricated model imported from Europe, built using local wood. The shack became the cheap working class dwelling in those cities facing a huge demographic growth and industrial expansion, like Casablanca.

Since its edification during the French domination, Casablanca has faced a kind of multiscale magnification, due to different factors: the need to locate the exporting factories near to the port; the impossibility to regulate since the beginning the huge flow of migrant workers coming from the rural regions; the necessity to control the indigenous population and the increasing financial speculations of lands. The ethnic segregation followed by Henri Prost (1914-1922) and the urban policies of zoning implemented also by Michel Ecochard (1952-1955) created the peculiar configuration of the city where the dominant class, the local élites and the working class had to occupy different specific areas. Different urban plans for each area meant also specific architectural models.

The industrial and manufacturing area was at the same time the most populated and the most controlled. Next to decorated and organised working-class districts, designed by famous French architects like Edmond Brion and built with private capitals of the factories' owners, it was easy to find military campsites. When the increasing number of workers needed to be housed, the same architectural model of the military camp was used by the municipal government for housing. The shack became the formal temporary home for the immigrant proletariat. Despite the efforts to govern the outskirts, the housing demand was impossible to control: enormous informal districts such as slums spread everywhere in the city and survive until nowadays. The wooden shack has become stronger, cheaper and lasting, using the new local material, the cement produced in local factories, combined with industrial waste products.

Linked to his working status and the presence of trade unions in the factories, the population of the slums has always been the most responsive to political problems. The headquarter of the Independent Movement was settled down in Carrières Centrales, the biggest working-class slum of Casablanca. Later, during the reign of King Hassan II (1961-1999), the political opposition had his grass-roots in the neighbourhood of Hay Mohammadi, where Carrières Centrales has been settled until its last and final destruction in 2016.

These are the places of the “urban poor”: far from being a kind of passive poor, his everyday life is marked by the struggle for recognition in the battlefield of an insurgent citizenship, fighting against the policies of dispossession represented by the restructuring plans implemented (such as the plan “Cities Without Slums” started in 2004). The participation of the urban masses to the “20 February Movement”, protagonist of the Arab Spring in Morocco in 2011 is an evident sign of this resistance, claiming the right to a decent house and the “right to the city”.

Keywords: informal urbanism, slums, French colonialism, social housing, Casablanca

1. CASABLANCA: CITY OF SLUMS

“Slums existed before their name” is what Raffaele Cattedra (2006) affirms concerning the origin of slums in Casablanca. Maybe, at the root of the French term *bidonvilles* there is a neighbourhood of Casablanca called Bidonville, the city (*ville*) made by cans (*bidons*), that appeared during the 20's. This name was used to identify a massive campsite in Casablanca, known before as *Gadoueville*, “mud city” (Cohen and Eleb, 1998 and Adam, 1968), occupied by rural migrants arrived in the city looking for a job and better life conditions. These new inhabitants originally lived in tents and temporary accommodation, in peripheral areas where dumps were placed too. Forced to find more stable and safe dwellings after systematic evacuations led by French authorities, these people started to build their own houses using new industrial waste materials coming from the factories placed in the outskirts of the city by the colonial government.

During the 30's foreigner travellers and administrators looked at Bidonville as a “monstrous suburb” (Sieburg, 1938) where masses of workers lived in quasi-inhuman conditions, in houses made of cans, metal sheets and hard plastic - as far as the local wood and sand (as shown in figures 1 and 2): in these agglomerations diseases and illnesses easily spread. Thus, Bidonville appeared such a city in itself, marked by the signs of the proletarianization and degradation of life.

Bidonville became a synonym of indigenous neighbourhood, in a context where indigenous meant also proletarian. The import of new way of production and organization of work as well as new technologies and materials represented the fundamental conditions to the spread of slums (Cattedra, 2006).

From this period on, French administrators started to use the word *bidonvilles* at the plural, referring to similar neighbourhoods located first in the industrial district, at the north-eastern area of Roches Noires, and then all over the city. The biggest ones, known with the name of Carrières Centrales and Ben M'Sick, were located just near this area. Witnessing the industrial origin of these settlements, the name of Carrières Centrales originally indicated the quarry where the stone blocks employed to build the port under the “Scheinder & Cie” company were taken. The term *karyan* in the local Arabic language came from a distortion of the French *carriere* (quarry): Moroccan people start to use this word at the plural referring to the same kind of informal settlement all over the city.

From the research conducted consulting the national Archives in Morocco and France it has been possible to affirm that, as some newspapers of that time described, when French administrators arrived in Casablanca at the beginning of the XX century, part of the population living outside the walls used to inhabit grass huts, *noual*, made of reeds (as reported in *Journal Général Travaux Publics et Bâtiments*, 23/09/1936) in a period when Casablanca was not yet a city but more a country village. So saying, the shack does not represented the vernacular model of settlement, like some scholars and administrator have pointed out, but was clearly later imported from abroad.

Establishing the formal Protectorate, French government decided to make Casablanca a strategical port and the headquarter of heavy industrial massive production, following his idea of the “useful Morocco” (D'Angio, 1995). Huge masses of labour were required to work at the fabrication of the new economic capital city: more and more arrived. Casablanca faced a unique increasing of the population: on a 50 hectares-wide land, the total population of the city counted about 25.000 inhabitants at the beginning of the XX century and nearly triple just in the first twenty years of the French domination (as it is underlined in table 1). As time went by, the system was not able to provide accommodation for everybody, so people had to supply themselves and this happened mostly in that informal, precarious way shown in figure 1.

Beside these “auto-fabricated” houses, this kind of precarious settlement was built also by re-using the military wooden shack, the bunkhouses firstly implemented to control the lands since the beginning of the XX century, during the establishment of the Protectorate (formerly endorsed in 1912).

At the beginning of the 20's the housing crisis had become already no more sustainable, mostly concerning the low-income housing – *Habitation à Bon Marché (HBM)* - for French employees first, veterans and Moroccan workers later. Some documents and letters stored at the National Archives of Rabat testify that temporary solutions were needed and undertaken: the cheapest and fastest way to provide a decent house to as much people as possible was found in using the prefabricated shack (as presented in a letter of 05/07/1919, AM), inspired by the model of the military “Adrian shack” – *baraque Adrian* shown in the figure 3 - already used to host public offices (Ecochard, 1955), translated in a reduced scale for dwellings. These shacks were easy to build using the local wood, a plentiful resource within the country. A new kind of human settlement took form, more similar to that one presented in figure 4 - doomed to change during the years.

In so doing, the urban peripheral landscape of Casablanca at the end of the 30's was composed by supposed temporary settlements of different manufacturing typologies: the auto-fabricated huts and pre-fabricated shacks.

Like an older inhabitant of Karyan Centrale told us during an interview conducted in June 2017 these dwellings gave a kind of architectural structure at the settlement, far from being really informal and spontaneous, with small streets and steps linking different “house-shacks”. The shacks were placed one next the other, or at “L” shape” for bigger families and each household had an enclosure, a kind of patio, at the middle or on the side. They had a standard and approximate size of 4x5 square meters.

These settlements have become just some years later more similar to a slum due essentially to two factors: first, the continuous increasing of the population led people to the necessity of splitting the shack to host more families. The architectural structure started to change and to downgrade. Second, these settlements deteriorated

also because the maintenance of the shacks has not always been possible. During the 40's, the participation of France at the II World War claimed the use of wood in the war industry: that one coming from the colonies was largely exploited in the mainland and no more available for local uses. People living in the shacks were forced to repair them in alternative ways with other materials, changing their original manufacture.

2. THE COLONIAL URBAN STRUCTURE OF CASABLANCA

The first General Resident Marechal Lyautey of Morocco was persuaded that a profitable and extensive control of the land had to be led by the implementation of specific urban policies within old cities and in building new ones. The first urbanist called to work in Casablanca from the 1914 to the 1922, Henri Prost, implemented the zoning principle (Prost, 1932) in conceiving new neighbourhoods: each area of the city had to be devoted to a specific economic activity. In this way the city centre represented the heart of the political, business and financial activities, well linked to the expanding port. The centre was embedded within the *ville nouvelle* – the new town – built following the Haussmann pattern, standing in opposition to the *ancienne medina* – the labyrinthine old town where the native population lived (Muslims and Jews). . The industrial area was placed going north-east from the port, among Casablanca and the near city-port of Mohammedia: the main factories of sugar, cement, textile and the thermal power station were settled there. As mentioned before, the economic expansion of the city called new inhabitants: new neighbourhoods for indigenous people were required. They occupied different areas of the metropolis depending on their social and working status: the native officers and middle-class families were located in proximity of the new town, following the south-western and south-eastern main traffic routes. The Moroccan working class was located near the factories.

French private companies such as the Sugar Company COSUMA and the Lafarge cement production provided to build some *cités ouvrières* – workers' cities - to host their laborers. These fully equipped suburbs were seemingly a kind of popular gated communities with two main gates to go in and out that opened and closed at specific times of the day. Workers had the right to live there with their family at very low prices rent, for the period they work at the factory. These *cités* had been designed by Edmond Brion and Auguste Cadet, French architects who contributed also to the project of the *Habous*, the classical Arab styled neighbourhood earmarked for the Moroccan oligarchy and the royal *entourage*.

The city was so divided following an ethnic spatial segregation: a spatial fragmentation that followed an ideological-utopian housing separation (Rachik, 1995). According to Lyautey's colonial project this was functional to the capitalist productive system performed by and within the new metropolis.

Prost was later followed by Michel Ecochard (1946-1955) whose bigger concern was to find a proper accommodation for the "*plus grand nombre*", the greatest number of inhabitants, a popular and social housing program for Moroccan people only. With his equipe of French AtBat architects¹ he proposed and implemented a specific and simple urban pattern based on a 8 square meters system. These housing cells were composed of two or three rooms at the ground floor, depending on the size of the family, and a central patio (see figure 5 and 6).

Ecochard imagined that the settlement built using this pattern would figure out a scalable urban system (see figure 7), an *habitat évolutif* where a first and second floor could be easily implemented following the expansion and the necessities of the families and the total population. In fact, the neighbourhood of Hay Mohammadi, located just next Karyan Centrale, was entirely conceived according to this pattern: most of the buildings have now reached the second or third floor. The scale consisted also in the passage from a horizontal dwelling to a vertical one, assuring the rehousing of all the people living in the shacks, passing from the slum through the 8x8 ground-floor pattern to the blocks of four-five floors, more typical of the modern European social housing (see figure 8).

The architects of AtBat (*Ateliers des Bâtitseurs – Afrique*) were also in the GAMMA stuff who animated and shocked the IX CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in Aix-en-Provence. It was composed by well-known modernist architects of the XX century: George Candilis, Sandrach Woods and Alex Josic among the others. The first two, who comes to be part of Le Corbusier staff for the *Cité Radieuse* in Marseille, were also the authors of the *Nid d'Abeilles*, *Sémiramis* and the Tower housing buildings (partially visible at the bottom right of figure 7 and as the subject of figure 8), extraordinary examples of brutalist architecture: the first two buildings had to host nearly 100 apartments each, with 8 shops at the ground floor. Since these buildings had to be allocated to people living in slums and the majority of them came from the rural region of the High Atlas, these architects studied their original way of living in the traditional *ksour*, the architecture of the rural community barns with overlaid patios and a common open-air passageway.

But unfortunately, the experiment didn't work so well: people use to think that these houses were disliked by Moroccan people because they were not used to live in apartment buildings like those one. There, the privacy and intimate life were compromised by the living together in overlapped floors for people that came from a ground floor lifestyle of the slums. There more space was available for each family: they could have some small land next to the house used to let some vegetables growing for the own consumption and animals living, like donkeys.

The passage from the shack to the block has not been so obvious, especially in those years where the first riots against the colonial power had started. The Ecochard project had to be realized between the 1952 and the 1956, the most troubled years of the French Protectorate that definitively ended in 1956 (Ayache, 1956).

As Candilis reports in his autobiographical book "*Bâtir la Vie*" (Candilis, 1977) he was personally invited in the

house-shack of one of the Nationalist Movement leaders based in Karyan Centrale, because he would like to have more information concerning these new apartment buildings. He claimed that the Movement would clearly invite all the Moroccan of Karyan Centrale to boycott these buildings because they were another expression of the French domination and the desire to control the population neglecting their own needs.

The shack model won over the apartment definitively more for political reasons than for comfort and vernacular ones. Slums started to become resistant over the years and over urban policies at the beginning because during the 50's they represented the headquarter of the independent nationalist movement. The neighbourhood of Karyan Centrale took the name of Hay Mohammadi just after the declaration of independence, because of the name of King Mohammed V who regained his power and made his first parade in Karyan Central to tribute his people and their devotion to the nationalist cause.

3. THE RESISTANT SLUM?

The permanence of slums in Casablanca, despite the political role played at a certain moment as subaltern spaces (Rao, 2006 and Roy, 2011), cannot be analysed just in these terms: it would be unfair and short-sighted to not consider all the social and political contextual aspects occurred.

First of all, as already mentioned, the settlement made of wooden shacks were the institutional and formal one and just as time went by they had not been removed or improved and have changed and deteriorated due to the use and weather condition. Secondly, the *bidon-villes* have been functional to the dysfunctional housing system since the beginning: the informal and precarious way of building an alternative home responded to a basic need that the institutions could not fulfil (Florin, 2001). Thirdly, many public and private actors have benefited from the presence of slums in the city: since the 20's Casablanca have faced a huge speculation in the housing and land market. The lack of a solid system of law concerning the private property led the city be ruled by private speculators able to buy and sell the same piece of land at a higher price in the same day (Ecochard, 1955, p.54).

The cost of the soil became very expensive in a short period: the Municipality of Casablanca during and after the French Protectorate did not own as much land and financial resources as required for social housing. Moreover, other concerns were primary, such as the expansion of productive industrial investments. Last but not least, local authorities, those one belonging to the department level, have now and then benefited from the informal status of slums: these settlements were (are) ruled by a regime of illegal trading and rent activities (Arrif, 2001) enabled to let the people living in an illegal way. In few words, to live in shacks people had to pay a bribe to the concerned authority: a kind of paying the right because not having the [housing] right.

Combining all these factors, the attitude of the institutions towards these neighbourhoods has always been of neglect, disregard, fear and misunderstanding, attaining a deep segregation from the other sectors of the city, justified by sanitary and security reasons. More often the demolition of a slum meant the spontaneous edification of a new one, because people living there did not had other means to live elsewhere. Where new housing was not possible, institutions went on trying to make the slum more healthy and solid (Benzakour, 1978) using bricks and cement to strengthen the structures.

Whatsmore the high level of corruption is one of the conditions that has led the public institutions to not be able to solve once for all the slum-problem after the independence. The "project Hassan II" proposed at the 90's by the King of Morocco has been a terrible failure: people who had started to pay their promised apartment have nothing received ever. The political situation of that period was peculiar. The attitude of that King has always been quite rude and totalitarian: no opponents were accepted so people had a deep fear to protest because of the violent repression performed by the government. At the beginning of the 80's many cities of the kingdom, Casablanca above all, had been shaken by the riots of the '81, caused by the growing of some food prices like bread (Clement, 1992). The repression was awful, many people died, shot by police forces opposing the protests in the streets and from the helicopters. The grass-roots of the riots were the streets of Hay Mohammadi and of course, Karyan Centrale, those streets of the discontent animated by the urban poor (Bayat, 2000) and promoting a kind of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 1998) where most of the citizenship rights were neglected.

The last program deployed called "*Villes sans Bidonvilles – Cities without slums*" (VSB in the text), promoted by the present King Mohamed VI in 2004, was supposed to solve the problem once for all. No wonder it has started just the year after the terrorist suicide bombing in Casablanca: the authors were found to come from one of the biggest slum area of the city, Sidi Moumen, in the south-eastern outskirts. A security response was needed: it has become evident, at the authorities' eyes, that these centres of poverty were also cradles of violence and crime.

Nevertheless, it had not such a good start: supposed to end in 2010, the results were not so satisfactory at all in such a big metropolis like Casablanca. No wonder again, a big impulse is arrived after 2011, year of the so-called Arab Spring that reached also Morocco, in a wave of rights demanding and the hope for a more democratic regime. As some scholars have pointed out (Baylocq and Granci, 2012, Bennani-Chraïbi and Jekhllaly, 2012 and Vairel, 2012) the first uprisings in 2011 before the "*20 février*" movement would started, took place in popular neighbourhoods such as Hay Mohammadi.

The regime responded changing apparently the Constitution in a more liberal sense, approved by a popular (but deeply criticized) referendum. Maybe it is not wrong to think that again it has been the security hand of the state that not delayed too much to react to 2011 popular protests hiding its purposes within urban policies. The

popular neighbourhoods, active spaces for conflicts, have always created frictions (like those ones mentioned by Tsing, 2011) within the power system and against the dominant class. Displacement and dispossession of people originally living there figured out as a strategy to calm down the popular opposition and avoid the possible unity of popular classes against the system.

New peripheral neighbourhoods are being built: thanks also to huge investments made by the private housing sector, the problem is finally on the way to be seriously treated, who knows if definitively solved.

Casablanca is nowadays marked by many construction sites, devoted both to the rehousing projects in the further outskirts and mostly to financial mega-projects led by global capitals.

Not all the families who was living in slums have until nowadays benefit from the VSB program and found a different and stable accommodation. From the results of the ethnography made in October 2015 and May-July 2017 it did not result so evident: many people have had initially to provide an accommodation by themselves going to stay to other relatives' house, trying to find the economic resources to pay a rent somewhere else, or a private stakeholder interested in building the apartments in the area devoted to the new settlements. In fact, the VSB program main outcome consisted in giving for free the land to the beneficiary families involved: facilitating the Access to bank loans and credits it would be up to them to build the houses in the specific urban pattern of four floors buildings where the ground one could be a commercial store. If they had not the means necessary, they could share the land property to a third private actor who would gain the ground and first floor building the other two for the slum coming family.

Many of the small slums of the city are still there (as shown in figure 10), with all the problems concerned and always under the threat to be evicted. What is sure is that Karyan Centrale, Ben M'Sick and part of Sidi Moumen slums no more exist in Casablanca, with all the historical memories these places represented, places where the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968) has been claimed and fought. There, more than everywhere, the right to the city assume the importance of the "right to have the right" to claim to be part of the community of citizens (Guarino, 2017) and no more subjects.

ENDNOTES

The AtBat group was originally based in France, created by Le Corbusier with the architects George Candilis, Josic Woods, Gyoji Benschaya and the engineer Vladimir Bodiansky. Candilis, Woods and Bodiansky then moved to Casablanca creating the sub-group of AtBat Africa with Michel Ecochard.

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Figure 1 and 2. Photos of some huts in Carrières Centrales, Casablanca (in Ecochard, 1953)



Figure 3. Model of the Adrian shack used in military camps by French government in Morocco

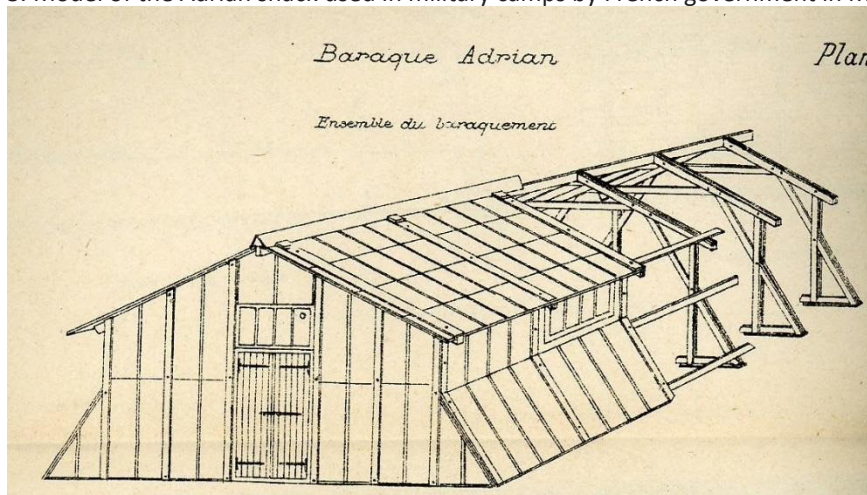


Figure 4. Gamma Study of *Bidonvilles* - squatter dwellings near Karyan Centrale, Casablanca



Figure 5 and 6. Plan of the "8x8" Ecochard pattern (fig. 5 in Woods, 1968; fig. 6 in Ecochard, 1955)

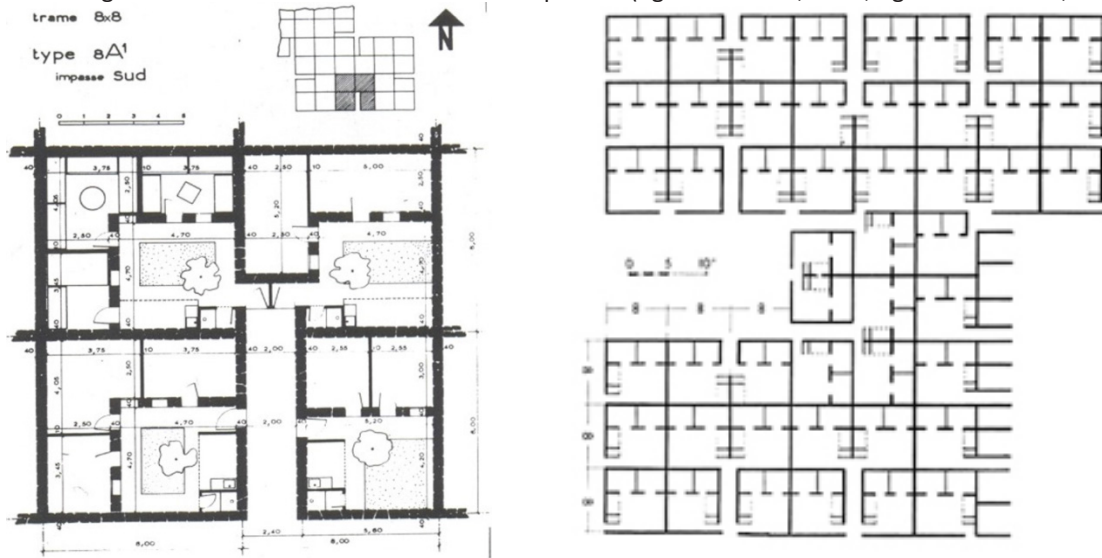


Figure 7. *Habitat évolutif* implemented by Michel Ecochard (in Avermaete, Karakayali & Von Osten, 2010)



Figure 8. The neighbourhood of Karyan Centrale with huts and shacks at the top right, the horizontal Ecochard pattern at the bottom right and the vertical blocks in the middle.



Figure 9. From left to right, *Nid d'Abeilles*, the Tower and *Sémiramis* buildings, designed by Candilis and Woods (1953-1955)



Figure 10. Surviving shacks and huts in Sidi Moumen, Casablanca (July 2017 – photo Laura Guarino)



Table 1. Demographic growth in Casablanca between 1897 and 1931 (in Rachik, 2011)

Pop./Date	1897	1907	1913	1918	1921	1926	1931
Jewish population	4 000	5 000	9 000	10 000	13 000	19 490	19 960
European population		1 000	20 158	35 000	35 283	34 984	55 291
Muslim population	16 000	19 000	30 000	41 500	48 700	52 134	85 167
Total population	20 000	25 000	59 158	86 500	96 983	106 608	160 418

2.9. SYMBOLS, ABBREVIATIONS

AM: Archives National du Maroc

AtBat : Ateliers des Batisseurs

CIAM : Congrès International de l'Architecture Moderne (Internationale Congress of Moderne Architecture)

COSUMA : Compagnie Sucrière du Maroc (Sugar Company of Morocco)

GAMMA : Groupe d'Architectes Modernes Marocains (Group of Modern Moroccan Architects)

HBM: Habitation à bon Marché (low-income settlements)

VSB : Villes Sans Bidonvilles – Cities Without Slums program

