

Rethinking Urban Heritage: Requalification, Neocolonial Fantasies, and Socio-Spatial Fragmentations in the Medina of Marrakesh

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Abstract

The historic Almoravid medina of Marrakesh is undergoing unprecedented socio-spatial mutations. This literature review synthesizes contemporary scholarship—including recent insights from Reitmaier et al. (2024), Stockstill (2024), Wilbaux (2002) [1-3], and the foundational geo-graphical surveys of Escher et al. (2001) and Escher and Petermann (2016) [4,5]—juxtaposed with the critical territorial framework of Moroccan geographer Saïd Boujrouf [6].

Using an anthropological and historical archaeology perspective, this paper examines the dialectical tension between the preservation of Marrakesh's endogenous material culture and its contemporary aesthetic requalification for global consumption. First, through the lens of the dbagh research project, we analyze the structural vulnerability of the traditional manufacturing ecosystem in the Bab Debbagh tanners' quarter. This area serves as a sanctuary for generation-al tacit knowledge but faces severe environmental, hydric, and gentrification pressures. Second, we deconstruct the mechanisms of international residential gentrification led by Western "lifestyle migrants," focusing on the spatial footprint of the Riad phenomenon. Mapped empirical data reveals a distinct ring-shaped spatial segregation, where affluent buyers secure orientalist, escapist domestic spheres while displacing raw artisanal activities. Finally, we address institutional conflicts arising from administrative formalization, noting how the shift from traditional community brokers (simsars) to international real estate agencies accelerates "accumulation by dispossession" against the local working class.

Confronting these sources highlights the risk of transforming a living, productive medieval city into a commodified showcase-medina (*médina-vitrine*). Ultimately, this review calls for an inclusive model of territorial governance capable of balancing global tourist attractiveness with local socio-spatial justice and artisanal sustainability.

Keywords: Historical Archaeology; Cultural Heritage; Tanning Industry; Lifestyle Migration; Gentrification; Spatial Segregation; Marrakesh Medina.

Introduction

The historic medina of Marrakesh, founded in the 11th century by the Almoravid dynasty, has experienced intense socio-spatial mutations since the dawn of the 21st century (Escher et al., 2001; Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1,4]. Far from a chaotic and spontaneous urban maze, its early layout evolved as a complex, three-dimension

al negotiation between imperial authority, religious ide-ology, and its highly resonant natural landscape (Stockstill, 2024) [2]. This structural order formed a highly cohesive traditional urban fabric (Wilbaux, 2002) [3]. However, long characterized by economic decline following the departure of local elites toward the colonial Ville Nouvelle (Guéliz) under the Protectorate's policy of spatial

segregation—a dynamic observed broadly across Moroccan historic centers (Abu-Lughod, 1980; Dethier, 1970; Ehlers, 1984) [7-9]—the historic center is now caught between two contradictory global currents (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. On one hand, local actors struggle for the survival of endogenous artisanal functions that anchor the city's material identity. On the other hand, the medina faces a massive residential requalification driven by exogenous capital attracted by a reinvented Orientalism (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

This literature review analyzes these divergent urban trajectories by organizing a dialogue among German-language, international, and local scholarship: the archaeological framework of the dbagh project (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1], the dynastic urban history of Stockstill (2024) [2], the morpho-architectural surveys of Wilbaux (2002) [3], and the urban geography analyses of gentrification and lifestyle migrations by Escher, Petermann, and Clos (2001, 2016) [4,5]. To avoid a purely Western academic bias, this corpus is systematically juxtaposed with the territorial geography scholarship of Moroccan professor Saïd Boujrouf.

Consequently, a central research question emerges: *To what extent does the tourist and residential requalification of the Marrakesh medina redefine the power dynamics between the preservation of its traditional productive heritage and its global aesthetic staging?*

To address this issue, our analysis is structured around three guiding axes:

- **The vulnerability of the productive medina** through the secular example of the Bab Debbagh tanners' quarter (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1].
- **The structural mechanisms of residential gentrification** and the subsequent emergence of socio-spatial fragmentations (Escher et al., 2001; Escher and Petermann, 2016) [4,5].
- **The institutional conflicts in governance** and the socio-economic disruptions induced by the transition from a neighborhood-based economy to a globalized market (Escher and Petermann, 2016) [5].

The Productive Medina: Material and Immaterial Conservation under Threat

The foundational pillar of the medina's spatial organization lies within its historical manufacturing function, which historically organized the urban morphology in distinct, interconnected trade quarters (Wilbaux, 2002) [3]. As demonstrated by the multidisciplinary "dbagh" project, the leather industry has constituted the economic backbone and heartbeat of the ancient city since its foundation (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1]. This urban integration was forged early on, as medieval rulers attempted to translate a rural past into a broad, imperial architectural vernacular that linked urban industries with regional landscape flows (Stockstill, 2024) [2]. Out of the historical production hubs in Marrakesh, the Bab Debbagh complex on the eastern periphery remains the oldest and most prominent, whereas the northern Riyād La'rūs district has been gradually absorbed by contemporary residential sprawl (Re-

itmaier et al., 2024) [1].

i. The Materiality of Craft: A Millennial Socio-Technical Ecosystem

The anthropological and archaeological methodology deployed by Reitmaier et al. (2024) [1] transcends mere material inventorying to capture the immaterial dimensions of heritage. The project focuses on the precise documentation of the traditional tanners' quarter to safeguard the tacit knowledge, material culture, and structures handed down over generations (Reitmaier et al., 2024, p. 381) [1].

The biological transformation of raw skins into leather relies upon a rigid *chaîne opératoire* where organic matter continuously interacts with localized natural resources (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1]. For instance, the crucial bating step (*confit*) utilizes the enzymatic properties of pigeon droppings (*bzāq*) to soften the hides, while vegetable tanning relies on endemic substances such as cork-oak bark (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1].

This ecosystem represents a deep socio-spatial matrix rather than a random juxtaposition of workshops. Historically, the tanners maintained strict technical exchanges and symbiotic relationships with the adjacent potters' neighborhood (*tabhīrt*) to the north, a spatial organization rooted in the medieval expansion of the city (Stockstill, 2024; Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1,2]. Potters purchased scraping waste from animal skins to fuel their kilns, while tanners utilized broken ceramic and brick fragments for the *ashqāf* stage to scrape residual flesh from the hides (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1]. On a symbolic level, this industrial space united the complementary cosmological forces of Water (tanners) and Fire (potters), historically separated by a magical marshland inhabited by invisible guardians known as the *rijāl al-marja*.

ii. Boujrouf's Diagnostic: Selective Patrimonialization Versus Global Mutations

Despite its millennial resilience, the medina's leather industry faces a severe structural crisis. Since the 1960s, the number of active tanneries inside the old city has been halved, leaving only about twenty operational small-scale structures today. Modernization waves throughout the 2010s altered or destroyed ancestral vats, water channels, and bark-grinding mills, while the shrinking footprint of individual workshops (*sedriya*) has forced artisans to relocate the critical drying phase outside the historic ramparts onto the peripheral *herāsh* site.

To contextualize this historical rupture, it is worth noting that while the old city remained relatively preserved from European urban penetration during the French Protectorate (1912–1956), Moroccan independence catalyzed profound socioeconomic shifts (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. This dynamic mirrors broader post-colonial transformations in other historic Moroccan cities like Rabat and Meknes, where the flight of local elites led to a severe structural polarization and infrastructural neglect (Ehlers, 1984) [9]. Prior to the influx of tourist capital, the residential heritage suffered extreme pauperization, leaving the mass of traditional buildings to

decay in an overcrowded or vacant state (Escher et al., 2001, p. 25) [4].

Upon this degraded urban landscape, Professor Saïd Boujrouf conceptualizes a process of “selective patrimonialization.” Boujrouf demonstrates that public policy and globalized tourism forces execute a political and aesthetic triage within the urban heritage. The global tourism economy prioritizes a quiet, contemplative, and residential medina, typified by the proliferation of boutique riads (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. Within this sanitized framework, the raw manufacturing functions of Bab Debbagh are caught in a tripartite vice:

- **Environmental and Hydric Pressures:** Tanning requires an intensive, continuous water supply, historically guaranteed by the Oued Issil and artificial channels (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1]. However, exponential tourism development exerts unsustainable pressures on the water table, a crisis exacerbated by Morocco’s recurrent drought cycles.
- **Socio-Spatial Marginalization:** The olfactive and environmental nuisances intrinsic to tanning are increasingly perceived by external real estate developers as negative externalities that jeopardize the tranquility of adjacent gentrified enclaves (Escher et al., 2001) [4].
- **Commercial Commodification:** Recent infrastructure renovations along the main artery leading to Bab Debbagh were implemented not to ameliorate the working conditions of the craftsmen, but to construct commercial storefronts optimized for selling leather goods to passing tourists (Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1].

Ultimately, a cross-analysis of Western and Moroccan scholarship reveals an ontological shift in the productive medina. Once a locus of localized subsistence and endogenous manufacturing value, the tanners’ quarter risks being reduced to a shallow visual attraction—a “showcase-medina” (*médina-vitrine*) in Boujrouf’s terms—where the artisan’s manual labor is tolerated only as an exotic background texture for global consumption (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

Residential Gentrification and the Rise of Lifestyle Migrations

The second analytical axis documented by German-language scholarship examines the pro-found morphological, demographic, and socioeconomic shift initiated at the close of the 1990s (Escher et al., 2001) [1]. Having been previously deserted by Moroccan elites in favor of the modern infrastructure of the *Ville Nouvelle* (Guéliz) during the Protectorate and immediate post-independence eras, the medina became the crucible for an international gentrification process of unprecedented intensity in the Arab world (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. This phenomenon materialized through the massive acquisition and rehabilitation of traditional courtyard houses—the riads—effectively transforming a degraded residential space into a globalized real

estate market (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

i. *The Ring-Shaped Mapping: Spatial Segregation and Visual Avoidance*

Pioneering empirical analysis conducted by geographers from the University of Mainz under-scores the meteoric acceleration of this exogenous real estate bubble. While the number of foreign owners was restricted to a few dozen isolated individuals at the beginning of the 1990s, it surged to approximately 150 people in the summer of 1999, before exploding to nearly 500 buyers by November 2000 (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. Fifteen years later, Escher and Petermann (2016) [5] observed that this dynamic had crossed a structural threshold, totaling the transfer of more than 2,500 medina properties to Western capital.

This physical reappropriation does not unfold uniformly but instead traces a rigorous ring-shaped spatial segregation (*ségrégation spatiale en anneau*), dictated by the pursuit of visual comfort and residential insulation (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. European investments cluster heavily within the tourist hyper-center around Jemaa el-Fna square and the primary thoroughfares of the central souks, colonizing the quarters of Mouassine, Ksour, and Riad Zitoun (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

Cartographic data reveals that buyers scrupulously avoid heavy artisanal and manufacturing sectors, such as the tanners’ quarter analyzed by Reitmaier et al. (2024) (Escher et al., 2001) [1,4]. The olfactive nuisances, smoke, and environmental waste inherent to the biological processing of hides are perceived by gentrifiers as intolerable spatial barriers. The urban fabric thus fragments into high-end residential enclaves sanctuarized for Westerners, while raw, working-class productive pockets are marooned on the margins of capital flows (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

ii. *Sociological Typology: Hedonism and Analytical Categories of Amenity Mi-grants*

To move beyond a strictly quantitative analysis of the built environment, Escher and Petermann (2016) [5] model the social reality of this community as ideal-types based on existential and hedonistic motivations. This framework operates within the concept of “lifestyle migration,” where relocation to the Global South is envisioned as an escapist project of self-actualization. Qualitative surveys distinguish several major lifestyles that fragment the use of the territory:

- **The Riad style:** Exclusively centered on the domestic space of the house.
- **The Self style:** Artists and architects seeking aesthetic inspiration and self-reinvention.
- **The Homo style:** LGBT community members attracted by an exotic sphere of social liberty.
- **The Mobile style:** Commuter migrants alternating seasonal residencies between Europe and Morocco.

- **The Social style:** Primarily French retirees seeking community recognition and local hospitality.
- **The Setting and Posing styles:** Highly mobile jet-set figures projecting their social status.

The Lead Profile: The Riad Style or the Paradigm of the “Purchased Paradise”

The “Riad style” stands as the most representative profile of the medina’s socio-spatial sorting. This lifestyle is determined by the encapsulation of home and garden, where daily life gravitates mainly around one’s own property (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 37) [5]. The purchase, renovation, and interior curation constitute the individual’s primary project of symbolic meaning.

For this group, the traditional dwelling acquires a utopian dimension, acting as a worldly re-flection of the Koranic paradise with its gardens and rivers (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 33) [5]. This “purchased paradise” offers total detachment, concealed behind high, windowless walls. Crucially, this escapist quest relies upon a profound economic asymmetry. The purchasing power differential allows middle-class Westerners to maintain an aristocratic lifestyle by employing a domestic staff (cooks, guardians, maids).

This dynamic reactivates asymmetrical structures of domination within the domestic sphere itself, mirroring historical master-servant relationships (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 34) [5]. Subordination is further reinforced by cultural hegemony: the majority of Riad style adherents refuse to learn Moroccan Arabic (*Dar-ija*) or Berber, enforcing French to direct employees and interact with the outside world.

iii. Critical Juxtaposition with Saïd Boujrouf’s Framework

Confronted with these empirical observations, Professor Saïd Boujrouf’s diagnostic provides an indispensable territorial overview. Boujrouf demonstrates that the rise of the Riad style is the structural driver of a capitalist reorganization of space. The desire to sanctuarize the riad as an escapist retreat collides frontally with the survival logic of the productive medina.

While foreign residents enclose themselves within a staged Orientalism, the practical value of working-class manufacturing neighborhoods is invalidated. Gentrification mandates the invisibilization of raw production to expand “clean” residential zones. Thus, exogenous lifestyles serve as the vanguard of an urban mutation where the living, manufacturing ancient city is erased to make way for a *medina-vitrine* tailored exclusively to the hedonistic fantasies of Western inhabitants.

Institutional Governance Conflicts and the Duality of Socio-Spatial Impacts

The third axis of analysis examines the institutional, legal, and psychosocial repercussions arising from the friction between endogenous community practices and a globalized residential economy. The massive influx of foreign capital fundamentally disrupts the traditional regulatory frameworks that historically stabilized

the medina.

I. Land Bureaucratization: From the Traditional *Simsar* to International Agencies

A profound structural upheaval lies in the radical mutation of real estate dynamics. Tradition-ally, land acquisition operated under informal, neighborhood-level customary regulations based on verbal agreement and trust (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5]. This transaction re-lied entirely upon the *simsar*, a local neighborhood broker whose authority emanated from vernacular knowledge of family lineages and local spatial history (Wilbaux, 2002) [3].

To secure their investments against the vulnerabilities of this customary system, Western buyers imposed formal legal requirements. Demanding state-backed guarantees against multi-generational inheritance claims, they generalized recourse to formal land registration (*titre foncier*) (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5]. This legal transition triggered two major consequences:

- **The Eviction of Endogenous Brokers:** Lacking institutional training to navigate a heavy, technical, and increasingly digitized state bureaucracy, the traditional *simsar* was progressively replaced by national and international real estate agencies (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5].
- **Hyper-Inflation and Speculation:** Lured by unprecedented profit margins, numerous inexperienced local actors reinvented themselves as informal intermediaries. This fueled a generalized speculation where almost every property in the medina is currently considered for sale (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5].

II. The Duality of Impacts: “Accumulation by Dispossession” Versus Physical Revitalization

The violence of this administrative formalization directly impacts working-class social structures. The exponential surge in land value generates an unprecedented housing crisis for local populations. The multiplication of lucrative property sales incentivizes landlords to systematically terminate commercial and residential leases to maximize immediate capital returns. This predatory dynamic has effectively extinguished the availability of *Rhan*, a traditional, highly accessible long-term lease contract specific to Moroccan customary law.

Deprived of this safety net, many tenants are forced to look for accommodation in peripheral residential areas outside the old city (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5]. This systematic eviction of long-term resident populations to accommodate exogenous capital constitutes a process of “accumulation by dispossession,” drawing on David Harvey’s Marxist territorial framework (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5].

To capture the full epistemological complexity of this urban transformation, this diagnostic must be cross-examined with the systemic framework of Professor Saïd Boujrouf, who highlights the deep ambivalence and structural duality intrinsic to this tourism-led requalification Table 1:

Table 1: Boujrouf's Systemic Grid: Opportunity Logics vs. Exclusion Dynamics in the Requalification of the Medina.

Analytical Dimensions	Revitalization Effects (Logic of Opportunity)	Dispossession Effects (Logic of Exclusion)
Economy & Employment	• Massive injection of external private capital. • Structural stimulus of the construction sector. • Financial survival of master craftsmen (<i>maâlems</i>)	• Destructive hyper-inflation of land value. • Extinction of affordable customary leases (<i>Rhan</i>) • Precarious service employment under extreme heat conditions.
Urban Morphology	• Urgent physical salvage of an ancient built environment previously condemned to structural collapse	• Architectural restorations based on factice Orientalism. • Sharp ring-shaped spatial segregation
Governance & Rights	• Modernization, legal transparency, and institutional formalization of administrative tracking	• Heavy bureaucratisation excluding traditional customary actors (<i>simsar</i>) • Subversion of endogenous territorial control.

This integrated grid demonstrates that the medina has fractured into two hermetic social universes (Escher et al., 2001). Daily contact between the local Moroccan population and West-ern residents is increasingly restricted to utility-oriented labor or business relations, while authentic neighborhood encounters have become exceptionally rare (Escher and Petermann, 2016, p. 41) [5]. The city's governance is thus structurally destabilized: the ancient urban fabric is no longer regulated by organic community solidarity, but by a globalized nebula of real estate and commercial actors who dictate the destiny of the old city at the expense of its historical social and manufacturing matrix (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

General Conclusion

In conclusion, this integrated literature review reveals a deeply contested territory, severely fragmented between the structural imperative to preserve its endogenous manufacturing functions and the powerful allure of globalized aesthetic staging (Escher et al., 2001; Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1,4]. The scientific contributions examined, enriched by the historical and morphospacial insights of Stockstill (2024), Wilbaux (2002) [2,3], and Professor Saïd Boujrouf, validate an onto-logical mutation within the ancient city, which is gradually slipping from an organic space of local production and dwelling toward an industrialized commodity designed for global consumption (Escher et al., 2001) [4].

First, the empirical work of Reitmaier et al. (2024) [1] highlights the urgent necessity to document and protect the fragile material and immaterial heritage of the productive medina, a system tied to the historical landscape co-dependencies of early Marrakesh (Stockstill, 2024) [2]. The secular tanners' quarter of Bab Debbagh embodies a complex, vulnerable socio-technical eco-system that acts as a repository for multigenerational tacit knowledge. This ecosystem is currently threatened by modern technical interventions, severe hydric stress, and aggressive real estate pressures from adjacent gentrified enclaves (Escher et al., 2001; Reitmaier et al., 2024) [1,4].

Second, the foundational research of Escher, Petermann, and Clos (2001) [4] and Escher and Petermann (2016) [5] demonstrates

the intense impact of international residential gentrification. Driven by the hedonistic preferences of lifestyle migration—specifically the “Riad style”—this exogenous reappropriation of space has generated a distinct ring-shaped spatial segregation. The high walls of restored riads sanctuarize an antimodern, escapist Orientalist fantasy while simultaneously reactivating master-servant relationships reminiscent of colonial structures due to North-South economic asymmetries (Escher and Petermann, 2016) [5].

Third, the institutional governance analysis reveals a violent formalization of the land market (Escher and Petermann, 2016) [5]. The modern insistence on state-backed titles has evicted traditional *simsars* in favor of international corporate real estate agencies, triggering steep property inflation and a process of accumulation by dispossession that penalizes local working-class tenants.

The theoretical framework of Saïd Boujrouf offers the critical synthesis required to unify these multi-scalar observations, demonstrating that the “selective patrimonialization” enforced by public and private actors systematically reduces the old city to a showcase-medina (*médina-vitrine*) (Escher et al., 2001) [4]. While foreign private investments have achieved the urgent physical salvage of a historic built environment whose internal rules of order were long established (Wilbaux, 2002) [3], they have concurrently devalued the practical manufacturing and social utility of the territory (Escher et al., 2001; Escher and Petermann, 2016) [4,5]. Local populations, priced out of the housing market and stripped of customary neighborhood regulations, find themselves marginalized or relegated to a folkloric background texture necessary to sustain the exotic quality of the tourist experience.

Looking forward, the long-term sustainability of the Marrakesh medina will depend on the capacity of municipal and national policies to transcend a purely cosmetic and residential approach to urban heritage. The core challenge of the coming decades lies in implementing an inclusive model of territorial governance capable of reintegrating the productive requirements of heavy crafts and sanctuarizing the right to the city for its popular classes. Only by achieving this equilibrium can Marrakesh maintain its high visibility on the global tourist stage while ensuring local socio-

spatial justice, allowing the medina to remain a vibrant, inhabited sanctuary rather than a museified theme park for amenity migrants (Escher et al., 2001; Escher and Petermann, 2016) [4,5].

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