

A VISUAL AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS TRACING THE TRAJECTORY OF 1950S LARGE HOUSING ESTATES IN ORAN, ALGERIA

Farah Kefif and Malek Hendel

Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering, University of Sciences and Technology Mohamed Boudiaf, Algeria

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Farah Kefif
farah.kefif@univ-usto.dz

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It was the dominance of a new architectural scene on Algerian soil, the large housing estates were revealed in different ways through all the means available to society at the time. Photographic dissemination became essential at the moment of the inauguration of the large construction sites. The aim was to publicize the actions carried out by the French colonization, which were clear operations intended to support the adopted strategy into both a political and social issue and to present a sign of modernity that was never recognized before. This article is aimed at tracing the trajectory of large housing estates across three disciplinary fields: architectural history, social history, and urban history. It explores their emergence, dissemination, and reception in space and time from 1950 to the present day through the lens of photography. The research question is to clarify how photography has represented large housing estates of the 20th century and how it continues to do so. Our approach involves two methodologies. First, we conduct an in-depth examination of archival documents from Algeria and the BNF Gallica online library. Second, we incorporate the narrative voices of inhabitants through semi-structured interviews, focusing on three of the most remarkable large housing estates in the city of Oran as a case study. The results identify three key phases in the trajectory of large housing estates in Oran: the period of dissemination and publicity, the period of virulent criticism due to physical deterioration, and finally, the phase of rebirth through the work of contemporary artists. During the analysis, a major aspect emerged: the trajectory of large housing estates is not uniform but rather varies from one recipient to another, depending on the specific context.

Keywords: The large housing estates; photographic representations; trajectory; narrative voice; history; Oran

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Tinthoin (1956), Oran was beginning to resemble a large modern European city, in line with the development of its port. As a port city, Oran has experienced a diverse mix of architectural styles that have left a lasting mark on the urban landscape and reflect its historical evolution. This culminated in the

adoption of modernist architecture between the 1930s and 1962, which was particularly evident in the outer suburbs. These areas, originally established in 1848, and were inhabited by the Muslim population (Lakjaa, 2008), gradually transformed from informal settlements into large housing estates beginning in the 1950s.

The large housing estates were the product of a modernist ideology, they were enthusiastically initiated in 1950 and completed in 1962, and are considered significant markers in the history of the outlying suburbs of major cities. The expression 'large housing estates' was first used in the Algerian context by Deluz-Labruyère (2004). These grand expressions of new housing models were represented and promoted through various media: magazines, newspapers, exhibitions, and fairs, with the aim of legitimizing an original approach that had already been practiced in Europe and Asia before eventually reaching Algeria. This movement was part of a broader trend linked to modernism from which emerged a distinct architectural language rooted in a strong intellectual current. Dufaux and Fourcaut (2004) described it as the embodiment of a modern movement with global ambitions. This architectural style, characterized as an appealing Mediterranean modernism, is the result of a reworking and refinement of both local and European influences (Benarbia & Belabed Sahraoui, 2024). Several Algerian architectural historians have conducted research aimed at reconciling colonial heritage with national identity (Dirèche, 2019), offering interpretations of colonial legacies within a postcolonial framework, specifically how this heritage was constructed and how it is perceived today (Oulebsir, 2004).

The development of large housing estates in Algeria took place in two distinct phases. The first phase was driven by the migration of people from rural areas and the resulting population growth, which affected both European and Algerian communities (Dufaux & Fourcaut, 2004). The second phase emerged in response to the need to restore housing stock that had been destroyed during the Algerian War of Liberation, which began in 1954. This critical period followed the implementation of the Constantine Plan, during which efforts intensified significantly, leading to the creation of internationally acclaimed architectural works. This era of collaboration is referred to as "the Algerian saga" (Malverti, 2001). The result was an exceptional achievement in modern spatial planning, marked by the widespread construction of large housing estates. Today, these developments represent 20% of the built heritage related to communal social housing (Filali et al., 2023).

Since 1962, when Algeria gained independence, the concept of large housing estates has faced growing criticism for failing to meet the evolving needs of the Algerian population. Much of this criticism arises from the incompatibility of these estates with the lifestyle of Algerian families, particularly due to the inadequate design of living spaces typically averaging 70 m² which are insufficient for accommodating large households (Laghoug, 2014). We suggest that, in the context of a poorly understood and often contested history of large housing estates, the most effective method for achieving a deeper understanding lies in identifying the trajectory and underlying trends of these developments. Such an approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the political, historical, and social dynamics that have shaped and continue to influence the concept.

Today, one can observe the distinct social impact of life in Oran's large housing estates simply by walking through the city. This is evidenced by the presence of amateur photographers, cultural events, exhibitions, and vernissages held in art galleries. These elements contribute to a visual and symbolic language that emphasizes memory, activism, and social proximity at least in the context of initial empirical observations. This finding clearly supports one of the key stages in the historical development of the large housing estates. A central question thus arises: How have these large housing estates been portrayed in photographs over the past seventy years, and how has photography represented and continues to represent the architectural and sociological dimensions of the mid-twentieth-century housing estates? This article explores the trajectory of large housing estates through spatial and temporal lenses, using visual and narrative representations shaped by various contexts of image production and use. Photographs serve as both informational tools and vehicles for fostering a deeper appreciation of the evolution and transformation of these spaces, thereby promoting a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of postcolonial society, employing a postcolonial framework of visual analysis. This study aims not only to illuminate the socio-political realities of post-independence Algeria but also to express the social and cultural transformations that have taken place under postcolonial rule. In doing so, it highlights a collective effort to reappropriate and reinterpret the spaces of the large housing estates, with the goal of constructing a shared memory and reinforcing national identity, while also recognizing the essential role of visual representation as a cultural protocol.

2. PHOTOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY AND FUNCTIONALITY IN THE MODERN ERA

Beginning in the 20th century, photographic images emerged as systematic tools for architects and engineers, as well as communication media for developers (Voldman, 1999). Photography introduced a new perspective on understanding historical avant-garde and modernist movements (Reverseau, 2018). Scholars have extensively examined various strategic mechanisms for effectively transmitting information through media. The use of projective imagery in photographs of large housing estates is subject to qualification based

on the specific context of enunciation in different historical periods (Bertho, 2014). This contextual framing reflects a renewed and dynamic perception of grand architectural forms. The visual technique of three-dimensional variation adds a sense of dynamism and subjectivity to the architectural object (Bressani, 2016). The non-verbal message conveyed through these images is intended to be understood by the 'photo-modern architectural' public. Modern architectural photography, as a visual representation of contemporary architecture, was conceptualized by Tony Fry to illustrate the intersection between photography and modern architectural design. In essence, photography revealed modern architecture (Windsor, 1994). This influence became especially significant when such images appeared in the specialized periodicals of the time, serving as a visual certificate of presence (Barthes, 1980).

In the context of colonial modernity, these images were widely circulated to promote the supposed benefits of colonization. Mitchell (1995) describe images disseminated in colonial settings as instruments of power used to persuade, manipulate, and even dominate individuals or groups. The French authorities employed such imagery with the primary goal of improving the living conditions of Algerians in ways that allowed them to control space and reinforce colonial rule, thereby legitimizing the existing power structures. Photography functioned as a tool of power and a vehicle for promoting a new ideological narrative, underscoring the link between imagery and the power of representation (Barthes, 1980). It was deliberately used as an instrument of domination: diffuse images of large housing estates projected an illusion of progress and modernity under colonialism. These representations had tangible effects on political dynamics, particularly in contexts marked by control and oppression (Azoulay, 2019). Such visual narratives played a key role in shaping colonial memory, often concealing the harsh realities of colonization and constructing an idealized, selective version of history (Stora, 2003).

Nizovtseva (2021) has demonstrated the importance of this method in the intercultural interpretation of urban entities, whose perception evolves depending on their geographical and social context. Similarly, Epstein (2022) highlighted the diversity of large housing estates built in France during the *Trente Glorieuses* by employing this visual medium. Photography proved to be an effective tool for countering the stigmatizing image often associated with these buildings, offering an alternative narrative at a time when many of them were undergoing demolition or renovation (Epstein, 2022). In a seminar presented by Bertho (2014), she outlined her methodology, which focused on examining and retracing the historical development of French housing estates through media analysis by studying the production of institutional photography.

Within a clearly defined framework, photographers of the era were tasked not only with capturing images but also with conveying the aesthetic value of modern architecture. This was a challenging objective, particularly as a distinct form of Mediterranean-inspired modernism began to take shape (Malverti, 2001). Initially, this media effort was supported by images of everyday street life, accompanied by new forms of social engagement such as sports, dance, and public festivities. These activities helped underscore the significance of this emerging architecture, which, despite lacking decorative features, gained social recognition through its integration with communal life. The more widely a social event is publicized, the greater its potential impact on political and social decision-making (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Rigoni & Ali-Oualla, 2020).

Historian Gunthert (2014) defines illustration as a form of media imagery that is primarily intended to convey a message, in contrast to photography, which is often associated with documentary purposes. This particular form of representation reveals significant visuals that are valuable for uncovering historical traces, exploring the social conditions of a given era, or serving as a foundation for recognizing architectural heritage (Bertho, 2014). It is widely acknowledged that this medium functions as a repository of information documenting events both major and minor, as well as the objects, places, and individuals that have shaped them (Michaud, 2001).

On the other hand, the use of aerial photography has significantly diversified since its inception, with numerous researchers adopting this medium to better capture and visualize objects from above. This perspective allows for a clearer understanding of complex urban forms (Bressani, 2016). The approach has proven effective in conveying objectivity (Arnaud, 2022), enabling viewers to perceive the monumental scale of large housing estates and gain a more realistic vision of the architectural project. It represents a form of emancipation from the human eye's limitations, offering a new way of seeing the world (Gervais, 2001). The visual power of such imagery lies in its ability to generate an alternative narrative one that introduces a certain distance and even dehumanization (Bertho, 2014). As a result, aerial photography becomes an essential tool in shaping a new visual ideology, defined by the ability to capture and reframe reality. In this context, Schelcher et al. (1909) a pioneer in the field, envisioned the use of balloon-based aerial photography to depict iconic landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Louvre in Paris.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology employed in this study sits at the crossroads of architectural and social history, focusing on the analysis of large housing estates through both institutional and artistic photographic production. By combining methods from these two disciplines, the approach relies on cross-referencing diverse sources to build a multidimensional understanding.

The study of visual narratives from the pre-construction and construction phases of the housing estates was primarily based on archival material from Oran, classified by date, as well as on digital resources from the BnF Gallica library. These sources enabled a detailed assessment of the architectural developments. This methodological framework proved to be an effective and structured tool for producing a coherent and insightful interpretation.

To explore responses to indirect questions, the narrative accounts covering both the post-construction period and the present day were developed using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method (Taylor et al., 2015). The sample was limited to third-generation inhabitants, men and women in their sixties and seventies, who constituted a smaller subset of the population, representing approximately 15% in each study area (Lescure: 45 inhabitants, Dar Beida: 23 inhabitants, Cité Jean de la Fontaine: 39 inhabitants). Participants were selected based on their motivation, availability, and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the study, particularly through their lived experience and deep knowledge relevant to the promotion and understanding of colonial heritage (Jepson et al., 2013).

Qualitative data analysis method: was grounded in narrative inquiry, understood as a framework that connects the interpretation of life experiences with social interactions (Riessman, 2008). This method focuses on how the residents' stories are structured and conveyed. The process began with the collection of all interviewee narratives in written form. Attention was then given to key passages that were recurrent across accounts, followed by an exploration of the deeper meanings embedded in these narratives. These insights were subsequently integrated into the broader analytical framework to construct meaning and facilitate the transmission of knowledge.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with contemporary artists, particularly amateur photographers, whose creative work highlights the image of large housing estates. Through their artistic expressions, these individuals have introduced a new spatial and cultural aesthetic, as well as a renewed sensitivity to the architectural dimensions of these urban environments.

The innovative aspect of this study lies in its use of photography to trace the trajectory of large housing estates, an approach that has not been previously explored. In this context, photography serves as a tool for conducting an analytical reading of the architectural product across space and time, capturing the oscillation between grandeur and decline. This visual narrative reflects how photography accompanies and shapes shifts in perspective, initially through ground-level views, but also incorporating aerial imagery, drawings, illustrations, and storytelling.

For this study, a representative sample of three iconic housing estates in Oran was selected. The choice was based on key criteria such as the prominence of the architect, the scale of the housing complex, and its location within the urban fabric (city center vs. suburban areas).

4. CASE STUDIES

According to Duparc (1950), the Deputy Mayor of Oran, the primary motivation for initiating the construction of large housing estates in 1950 was to provide accommodation for residents of slum areas, some of whom were not native citizens. However, the underlying and more significant objective was to halt the continued spread of informal settlements within the city and to preserve both its aesthetic character and overall quality of life¹.

In response to the housing shortage in Oran, beginning in 1950, several housing programs were launched on the outskirts of the city, leading to the development of large-scale housing estates. These expansive structures, built outside the city center, served as experimental sites for social housing initiatives. They were made possible through the coordinated efforts of the Housing Department, led by Mr. Oyon, and the Urban Planning Department, headed by Mr. Durin. The General Delegation of Building Organizations in Oranie, also under Durin's leadership, sought to advance pioneering work in the field of social housing by initiating the

¹ Magazine Municipal Life, 1951, page 18. A review was conducted at the archives of the Wilaya of Oran on March 13, 14, and 15, 2023.

construction of extensive housing estates. This coordinated approach clearly illustrates the collaboration among multiple entities, including the C.I.A²; C.I.L.O.F³; H.L.M⁴ and the key meeting held in Paris in November 1954, which brought together mayors from across France and abroad to assess and address the housing crisis.

This crisis acted as a catalyst for a wave of architectural projects in these semi-rural zones. The suburban areas were designed according to the populations they were intended to serve; some were exclusively for Muslim residents, while others were planned for mixed communities of Muslims and Europeans. The transition from substandard and precarious housing to more livable and innovative dwellings marked a significant turning point in the history of colonial housing in Algeria. These residential developments were conceived as autonomous urban units, equipped with cultural, healthcare, educational, and commercial facilities (Smair & Kacemi, 2019).

The scale of this transformation led to the development of the large housing estates such as Lescure, Jean de La Fontaine, and Dar Beida those selected for this study⁵ (Table 1). These modern large housing estates gave rise to what might be described as a “mystical style,” distinguished by grand, harmonious proportions, clean geometric forms, and a deliberate interplay between exterior and interior spaces, aimed at creating a balanced and holistic living environment.

Table 1: The case studies selected

Large housing estates	Year of construction	Architect	Number of dwellings	Numbers of inhabitants in 2022 ⁶	Neighborhoods
Lescure	1955	Henri Désiré Cantie and Fernand Pouillon	602	3173	Plateau
Jean de la Fontaine (city garden of the white ravine)	1958	Roman Diego ThadéeRémy architect D.P.L.G.	530	2968	Gambetta
Dar Beida	1952	Pierre-Jean Guth great prize of Rome	600	2701	Dar Beida

5. RESULTS

The origins of social photography can be traced back to political activism aimed at documenting the living conditions in slums and shantytowns (Figure 1). In 1950, Oran had approximately 1,550 dwellings in these informal settlements, all of which required significant improvement. These photographs served as visual testimonies, offering insight into the social realities of the colonial era. As a result, photography was redefined as a tool for capturing and representing reality translating what the camera’s sensor perceived into a visual narrative (Krauss et al., 1990). This use of photography soon became a key component of the political agenda for developing the Oranese suburbs.

5.1 Multi-disciplinary propaganda

At this stage, large housing estates had begun to take shape. Between 1955 and 1958, the HLM office oversaw the construction of 2,506 dwellings. The emergence of this new architectural ideology was revealed through two active metropolitan media outlets. One was *Municipal Life*, a biweekly magazine focused on municipal administration, launched in the 1950s. It regularly featured special issues dedicated to large-scale housing developments, offering detailed insights into every phase of the process from planning to project completion accompanied by photographic documentation of construction progress. The rich visual content of the magazine provided a deeper understanding of the concept and highlighted each new large-scale project underway in Oran. The second publication was the monthly illustrated magazine *Chantier Nord-Africain* (*Construction Site of North Africans*), which focused on architecture, urban planning, and Oranese society. As the older of the two running from 1930 to 1960, it regularly showcased major construction projects. Each

² Algerian real estate financing.

³ Housing company for civil servants.

⁴ Municipal Housing Office HLM

⁵ An exhaustive list of large-housing estates built in the Oran area was drawn up in the first author’s doctoral thesis, in which more than 50 large-scale developments were listed for the year 2022/2023.

⁶ Current population figures are taken from the ONS which organises and coordinates various statistical surveys, such as population censuses.

feature typically included one or two photographs -either pedestrian or aerial views- along with plans and architectural models, effectively conveying the ideas of modernity and the novelty of these housing concepts (Figure 2).



Figure1: View of the Courbet shanty town in Oran being demolished in 1950
(Source: *La vie municipale*, 1958, p.28)



Figure 2: Covers of the magazine municipal life n° 55.1959 and construction site of Nord-Africans n°1.1950
(Source: Archives of the Government General of Algeria, 1959)

Due to its scale and the speed with which it was developed, the Lescure housing estate was prominently featured in numerous editions of the magazine, accompanied by official photographs that highlighted the careful attention given to this architectural landmark within the urban fabric of Oran's city centre. However, many of these representations were based on a collection of geometric drawings plans, sections, elevations, and detailed renderings closely resembling those found on an architect's drafting table, offering a precise and idealized vision of the project in its final form (Figure 3).

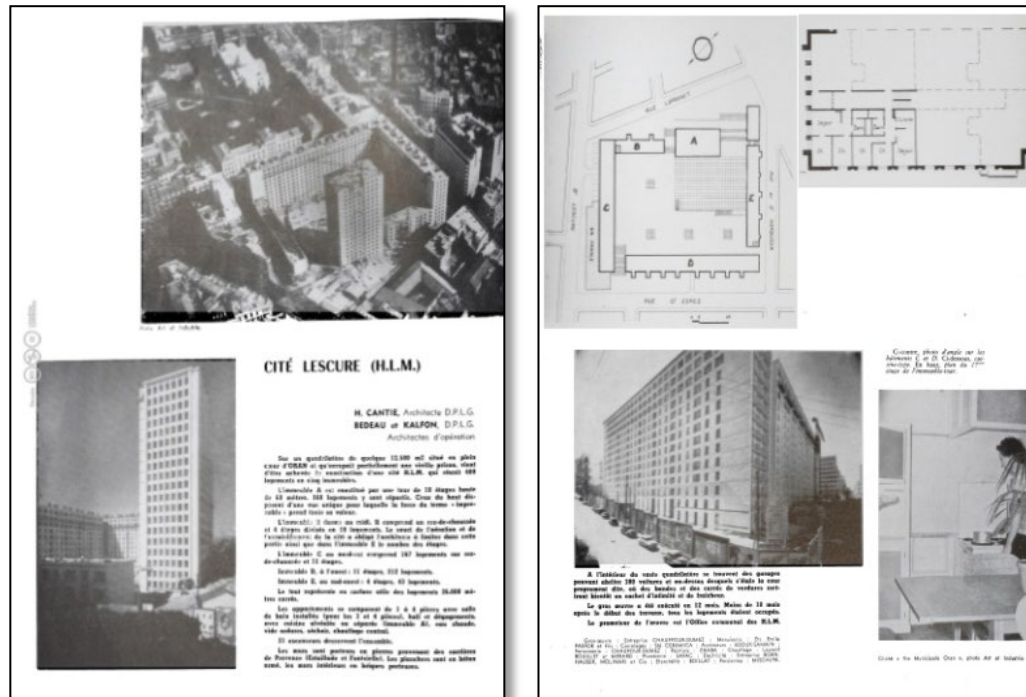


Figure 3: Photography of the designed and lived space of Lescure (human interaction and social structure)
(Source: Les Chantiers nord-africains, 1957, pp. 20–21)

The analysis of these two iconic magazines revealed three main categories of photographic images, each significant for its mode of dissemination to the public (Table 2). It's clearly defined purpose and target audience, as well as its inclusion within a two-dimensional framework both aimed at revelation. These images were used to construct a persuasive and narrative outstandings that both promoted a new model of housing which served as a political tool to showcase the state's efforts and progress.

Table 2: The categories of photographic in two iconic magazines

Category 1	Social photography dates back to the era of the shantytowns, with notable contributions from photographer Jean-Paul Bois-Margnac ⁷ .
Category 2	Portraits of political groups highlighting the progress of unprecedented urban beautification initiatives.
Category 3	The inauguration ceremony marking the introduction of large-scale housing estate architecture.

Pedestrian photography taken during the construction period provided the first visual representations, playing a pivotal role in promoting the modernist character of large housing estates (Figure 4). These magazine pages were primarily composed of images, each accompanied by concise captions designed to create a visually engaging layout. This approach allowed readers to interpret the content through brief explanatory texts. Even without understanding the language or the specific subject matter, viewers could easily grasp the nature of the structures depicted, owing to the iconic strength of the photographic image.

⁷ Few civilian photographers have been found for this period, unlike the 19th century when the camera was invented and many travelled to this side of the Mediterranean. Moulin in 1856–1857, Greene in 1856, de Beaucorps in 1859, Disderi in 1860 or Baldus in 1864 and many others in the same years, Dupont in Oran extracted from the book 'L'Algérie des premiers photographes' Mohamed-Sadek Messikh (2003)



Figure 4: Pedestrian views of the three large housing estates of the case study (Dar Beida, Lescure, Jean de la Fontaine.)
(Source: “Oran website from the 1950s,” n.d.)

The aerial perspective also proved advantageous in accurately conveying the scale of large housing estates, including Lescure. The white façades emphasized both the mass and structure of the buildings, which appeared as a cohesive geometric composition, as illustrated in Pierre Jarrige’s *Histoire de l’Aviation en Algérie*. This composition was appreciated not only for its aesthetic value but also for how well it aligned with the intended function of the architecture. Beginning in 1954, this technique became increasingly widespread during the Algerian War of Independence and was primarily employed by military personnel such as Captain Vincent Serrano and Arthur Smet. The latter, a non-commissioned officer and photographer stationed in Algeria in the 1950s, focused much of his work on the city of Oran. At the time, many of his photographs were featured in local publications such as *L’Échod’Oran*. His distinctive approach produced striking results, often presenting panoramic views enhanced by dynamic visual effects (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Aerial view of City Lescure, air force (Source: Jarrige, 2015)

The tower and curving bar of the Dar El Beida housing estate are both grand and imposing, symbolizing the triumph of modernity. M.J. Vulmière, a researcher at the Institute of Optics, developed a compact and innovative periscope that allows for an in-depth exploration of architectural models. This device offers a precise perspective from any chosen point on the model, granting the architect a view equivalent to that of a person standing at that exact location once the structure is completed. The variation in scale provided by aerial views makes it possible to observe the entire housing complex and its various facilities including the stadium, smaller residential buildings, access roads, playgrounds, and more (Figure 6).

“Dar Beida has all the necessary facilities, and the national gendarmerie headquarters is right next door. The residents are calm but not inactive this housing estate was intended for military families. It is clean, well-maintained, and the accommodations are spacious. The estate is privatized and secure, with access limited to residents only.” (Testimony of a 60-year-old former soldier who was among the first to settle in the Dar Beida housing estate after independence, March 22, 2023, as recounted during the interview.)



Figure 6: Aerial view of the Dar Beida marine estate
(Source: Les Chantiers nord-africains, 1957, p. 26)

Archived postcards offer valuable insights into the social environment and lived experiences of the inhabitants during the period of delivery, particularly among the European population. Through their written messages, these postcards recount impressions of the architecture, the social impact, local events, and personal sentiments. Far from being mere nostalgic recollections, they serve as authentic illustrations of social realities. By combining visual representations of these spaces with the words of their inhabitants, we gain a distinct and nuanced perspective on the large housing estates (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Postcard from the 1960s, Jean de la Fontaine (Source: Reproduced from Dentelée, ca. 1960)

5.2 Onslaught of vehement criticisms

The field study identified a specific period marked by the physical decline of housing and public spaces, which led to growing dissatisfaction among residents and triggered the first wave of strong criticism directed at these large housing estates. Most interview responses from residents across the three selected estates revealed a shared perception: the deteriorating condition of the buildings manifested through delinquency, social exclusion, prostitution, and other issues misaligned with the current needs of the population and existing urban policies has reinforced the narrative of neglect, decay, and uncleanness.

At the same time, in an international context, particularly in France Epstein (2022), argues that photography has contributed to the stigmatization of housing estates, often associating them with social issues such as isolation and poverty. In contrast, in Oran, photography does more than merely document the criticized physical condition of these estates; it actively participates in constructing collective memory and highlighting the richness of Algeria's social history. As one inhabitant recalled: "In 1958, it was a beautiful housing estate, home in particular to doctors. After independence, people began occupying the premises, and the estate gradually deteriorated. Most of the former residents left between 1970 and 1990." (Woman aged 70 at the time of the interview in 2020, originally from the Lescure estate).

The interview excerpt highlights a complex sentiment a form of satirical admiration for the large housing estates built in the 1950s. Despite their flaws, many former residents of Oran developed a genuine attachment to these environments, which were not only inhabited but also deeply valued. This pattern of emotional investment, followed by eventual disillusionment, is evident in approximately 90% of the major housing estates across the city of Oran. Journalists played a key role in amplifying the voices of residents by publishing articles that articulated their demands. These pieces were often accompanied by “projective” photographs images intended not merely to inform but to issue a warning and evoke a sense of urgency about the need for intervention (Figure 8).

Although not part of the present case study, the Perret housing estate in Oran has come to symbolize this decline. In journalistic narratives, it is portrayed as a hazardous urban enclave. Photographs frequently depict its physical deterioration, contributing to a broader narrative about the widespread decay of large-scale housing developments in Oran. Many of these estates are now perceived as sites of urban, social, and architectural distress. Some have even become informal shelters for displaced populations, including refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa.



Figure 8: The physical state of the Perret housing estate cover and page 04 of the CAP western daily newspaper No. 1734 Sunday March 8, 2002

5.3. Rebirth⁸ time

5.3.1 From criticism to appreciation

In recent years, there has been a growing interest amongst artists, architects, and photographers in the visual aspects of 1950s large housing estates. One of the most notable contemporary approaches is that of Leo Fabrizio, whose most recent international conference and photography exhibition was held in Oran in 2022. The distinctiveness of his photographic work has led to its publication in *Madinati*, a well-known French-language Algerian magazine. In particular, the magazine highlights the work of Fernand Pouillon in Algeria (Blanc, 2022) through a photo reportage aimed at “restoring the legacy of F. Pouillon’s work” by capturing striking images of some of his most valuable creations.

Fabrizio’s photography deliberately reveals the exceptional and prestigious nature of Pouillon’s major projects, using meticulous framing and detail to emphasize their aesthetic value. While his approach echoes the visual style of the 1950s, it serves a different purpose: the former aimed to glorify the architecture for public admiration, whereas the latter adopts a more reflective strategy of visual enhancement and reinterpretation (Figure 9).

5.3.2 Photographic practices and contemporary artistic conquest

Following the phases of distribution and critique, a new phase of nostalgia emerges, conveyed through the photographs of contemporary artists. In contrast to earlier criticisms, the images of the Lescure housing estate present alternative perspectives. These photographs are thoughtfully composed to align with moments of cultural expression such as dance performances, musical events, and religious celebrations like Eid. This dimension of the city reveals a previously overlooked reality, recognized by the younger generation of residents who view the estate as a space for developing their talents, pursuing their passions, and practising their faith.

⁸ ‘Bring back to life’ or ‘recycle’.

Modern photographers with a deep interest in colonial-era architecture have explored new artistic approaches to visually reinterpret the prominent housing estates of that period. By using techniques such as low-angle framing, they enhance the scale and spatial dynamics of these residential and open areas (Figure 10). The photography studio *Ma Production* deliberately produces images designed to evoke emotion, moving beyond a strictly documentary style. This shift introduces new methodologies and rich avenues for investigation, particularly in relation to the historical significance of modern residential complexes. The collaboration between photographer and architect is not merely coincidental, but rather complementary demonstrating how visual techniques can enrich our understanding of architectural and urban contexts.



Figure 9: Conference and opening of the exhibition of photographs by Leo Fabrizio on the work of Fernand Pouillon
(Source: Authors, May 2022 in Oran)



Figure 10: Music and dance performances in the Lescure housing estate and Perry housing estate
(Source: Reproduced from Ma Production Studio, 2022)

6. DISCUSSION

Tracing the evolution of large housing estates from the modern colonial period, through various temporal layers within the specific Algerian context, particularly in Oran requires a multifaceted approach to data collection. This study draws on local archival materials, the BNF Gallica online library, and interviews with inhabitants. These sources foster the active involvement of communities that once inhabited these spaces and provide crucial insight into the factors that shaped the photographic representation of housing estates.

From their construction to the present day, perceptions of large housing estates have undergone significant shifts architecturally, socially, and urbanistically. Initially, these estates embodied a utopian vision, representing a transition from precarious, insalubrious dwellings to modern, fully equipped housing solutions.

Accordingly, the mobilization of photography played a central role in this transformation, serving as a strategic tool aligned with French colonial policies, called Ministerial photography (Bertho, 2014), contributing to the dissemination of these developments through magazines, newspapers, and exhibitions featuring models and plans. These early photographs were not neutral; they were part of a broader ideological narrative that promoted modernist progress and prosperity.

The analysis of this first phase reveals a deliberate use of both aerial and pedestrian photography to highlight architectural and urban features through changes in visual scale. The goal was to glorify and legitimize these constructions as symbols of modern architecture. Aerial photography, initially developed and circulated by the French Air Force, reflected a coordinated effort to associate state power with housing production, reinforcing the political symbolism of these estates.

Moreover, the first generation of residents expressed a sense of pride and attachment to this new form of housing. Postcards from the era serve as valuable testimonies, capturing not only architectural qualities but also aspects of daily life, community events, and personal sentiments. These visual and written records depicted these urban fragments as remarkable achievements, freshly delivered and emblematic of a new way of living.

However, the post-independence period marked a turning point. A new photographic narrative emerged, one of critique and documentation of decline. This shift was driven by the lived experiences of residents: physical deterioration, rising social problems, insecurity, delinquency, and a general lack of maintenance in common areas. These conditions necessitated a new form of documentary photography, capturing the disjunction between inhabitants and their built environment. Interviews conducted during this study reveal widespread dissatisfaction, prompting intervention by photojournalists whose work aimed not only to document decay but also to preserve memories, emphasize proximity to central Oran, and highlight the estates' symbolic and historical value. Unlike their French counterparts, often criticized for their lack of history and collective memory (Kokoreff, 2003). Oran's housing estates continue to be inhabited and remembered. Despite persistent criticisms and inhabitant's complaints, no large housing estates in Oran have been demolished to date, even though over fifty such estates have been recorded by scholars. Their continued existence suggests that they are increasingly viewed as historical witnesses to a pivotal era in Algeria's urban development.

The final phase, which can be termed "rebirth," is characterized by a nostalgic re-evaluation of these estates through contemporary photography. In contrast to earlier critical perspectives, today's visual representations often celebrate the aesthetic and social dimensions of these complexes. Artists, architects, and photographers now engage with 1950s housing through a renewed visual lens, transforming large-scale social housing into a subject of both academic inquiry and cultural production. This resurgence parallels what Barroso (2016) describes as the "pornography of ruins," where decay becomes visually captivating. Yet, beyond aesthetic appeal, these images seek to restore meaning and reinsert these sites into the public imagination.

Photographer Leo Fabrizio, for example, has contributed significantly to this renewed vision. His 2022 exhibition in Oran and his photo-essay published in *Madinati* showcase the monumental architecture of Fernand Pouillon. Fabrizio's images reveal not only the monumental qualities and use of natural stone but also the lived realities of inhabitants their habits, practices, and spatial appropriations seen through balconies, windows, and shared spaces. These visual narratives highlight a continuing social vitality that stands in contrast to earlier portrayals of decline.

This renewed interest frames a crucial question: what is the future of housing in these estates? Contemporary photographic practices offer alternative readings of these environments, revealing their historical, aesthetic, memorial, and functional values. Through this lens, large housing estates are increasingly understood as heritage assets. Photography, in this sense, does more than document it shapes public perception and policy by cultivating a distinct artistic sensibility that influences how these structures are evaluated and preserved.

7. CONCLUSION

Photographic depictions of large housing estates have evolved across multiple historical periods, progressively enhancing their readability and allowing for a more coherent and rational understanding. Initially framed through pedestrian and aerial photography aimed at glorifying an unprecedented urban concept, these representations transitioned into a narrative of critique following Algeria's independence. In the contemporary era, the visual discourse has been revitalized by multidisciplinary artists, rich in creative approaches. Their primary focus lies in showcasing the built legacy of these estates, using it as a medium to reflect their artistic and critical practices.

This unique engagement is considered an authentic response to an architectural heritage that has often faced criticism. By employing a diachronic photographic methodology, this study reveals both the potential and heritage value embedded within many large housing estates. Some of these sites merit consideration for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list or integration into community arts projects, initiatives that could reinforce the local social and cultural fabric and offer an effective strategy for preserving these estates for future generations. We align with Nizovtseva (2021) in asserting that the configuration and development of large housing estates vary according to geographical, social, and political contexts. In contrast to the demolition of the Debussy building in La Courneuve's "Cité des 4000" in France, interviews with stakeholders in Oran reveal that demolition was never seriously considered, and no large estates have been torn down. Nevertheless, a crucial component remains missing in the recognition of these estates: their official designation as heritage sites that testify to the era of modernist architecture, a practice already underway in other global cities such as Paris and Bangkok. Efforts to preserve these estates must go beyond conservation; they should also aim to enhance living conditions by integrating essential services and fostering stronger community interactions. However, in Oran, current debates over preservation underscore the tensions between the desire for heritage recognition and the complexities of a shared and sometimes contentious history.

Finally, extending this study to other Algerian cities, particularly Algiers the capital, would allow for a comparative analysis of housing estates from the colonial period through independence to the present day. This broader approach would not only test the universality of the findings discussed here but also contribute a rich repository of historical and artistic insights that would further deepen and enrich the study.

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APPENDIX

Table 3: A photographic summary of the trajectory of the large housing estates of the 1950s through the different strata of time. (Source: Authors)

Scale Period		Urban	Architectural	Social
0/Pre-construction (before 1950) (period n = °0)		Emptysuburbs	/	The figure of the poorly housed, children playing in the streets surrounded by substandard housing.
1/Construction + delivery (1950–1962) (Period n = °1)		Aerial view (military aviation)	Pedestrian view	New social facts and postcards in circulation
2/Post-construction (1962–2010) (period n = °2)		/	Criticism through photo-journalism	Source of all social ills, especially juvenile delinquency
3/Present day (2020–2024) (period n = °3)	Institutional players	Aerial view (drone)	Exhibition and vernissage	Humanist photography.
	Aerial view (drone)		A 'low-angle' framing method that enhances the value of the built and outdoor spaces	Artistic events such as the dance rasp and religious events in particular