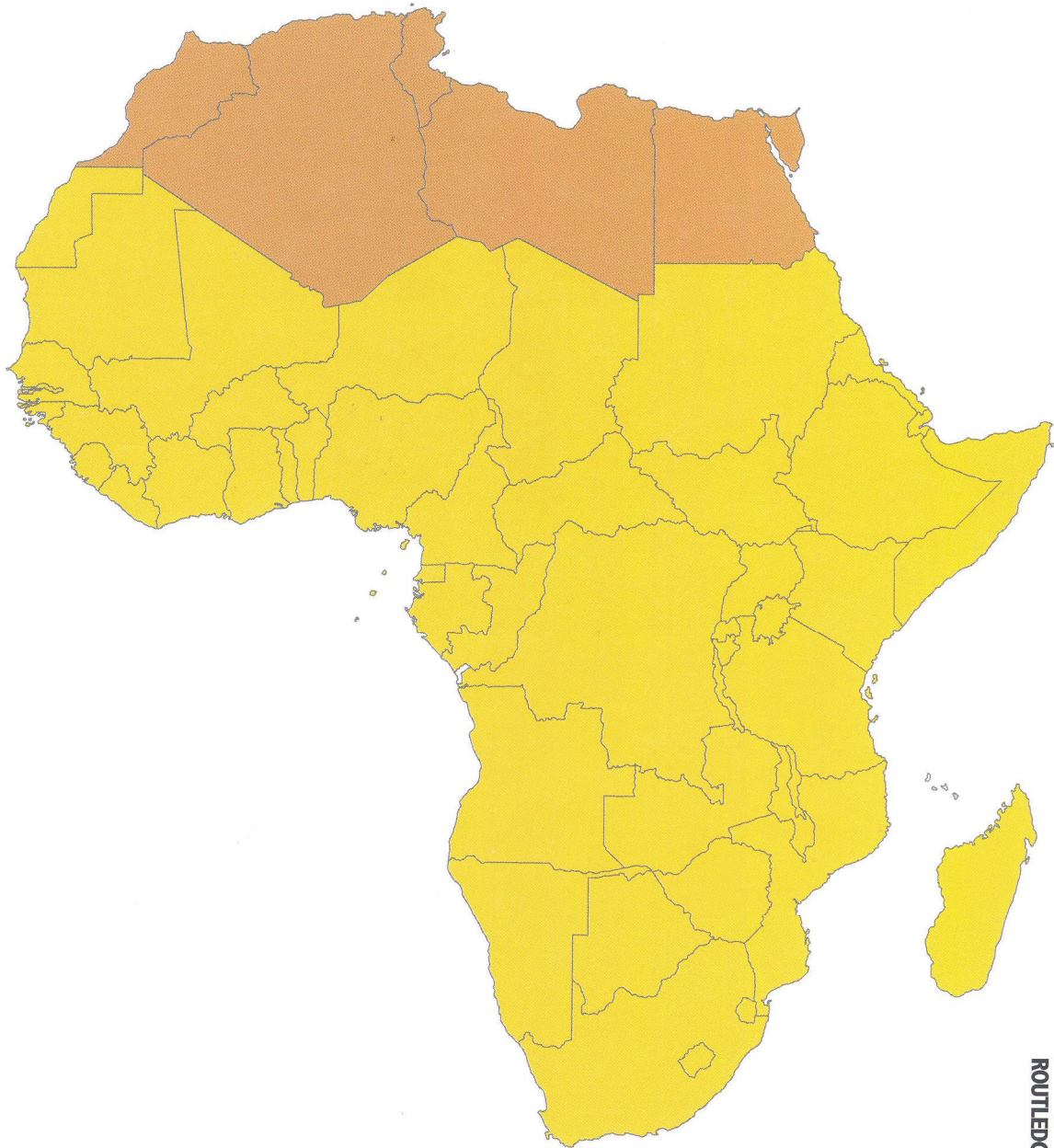


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Urban Planning in North Africa



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Chapter 8

Urban Changes in the City of Setif, Algeria: Colonial and Postcolonial Periods

Abderrahmane Diafat and Said Madani

Introduction

The urban process in Algeria continues to be confronted in the postcolonial period with enormous challenges, such as increasing housing demand and the expansion of informal settlements in the fringe-belts. The existing housing stock was excluded from the priorities of the urban policy, in the first decades after independence, except some private self-built houses. In fact, the rapid demographic growth, during the last 40 years, made housing a major concern and led to rapid urban expansion through the creation of new allotments and collective housing areas, and recently through the development of public and private estates. Due to these factors, urban development in Algeria took mainly the form of new urban extensions in the postcolonial period. New legislation was issued in the 1990s and the state stopped being a provider of social goods becoming instead mainly a regulator of economic and social relations. In this context, housing was no longer seen as a social product but as an economic product for rent or sale. For that reason the private sector took a larger share in the housing sector.

The planned cities of colonial origin, mostly in the north, like Setif, have a clear layout, based on the grid system. The main street, the main square and the location of the landmarks created a balanced urban network that contributed to better urban development after independence. These cores have become the historic centres in this type of city. Their expansion, in the 1970s and 1980s, created belts of mass housing around the city without amenities. The new allotments of the mid 1980s and 1990s similarly created urban chaos, particularly in those unfinished residential areas.

The study of the formation and development of Setif, namely the development of its historic centre, may provide some light on the mechanisms responsible for the changes the city experienced over the years. The objective of this chapter is to examine the urban changes during the colonial and postcolonial periods in Algeria. The study is focused on the city of Setif and in particular on its historic centre. We will therefore examine, not only the urban and architectural achievements and styles and materials of the colonial period but also and especially the current state of the city. The chapter intends also to make an inventory related to the issue of urban renewal in the historic centre. Some thoughts on the potential, limits, and challenges of 'rebuilding the city on the city' are outlined.

The chapter is divided into four parts: the introduction, a historical background of the city of Setif, key trends in the urban process, and a conclusion. Some topics are developed under the key trends to highlight the main characteristics of the urban form and its evolution through different periods.

Setif: Historical Background

During the French scientific exploration of Algeria in 1840, while describing the importance of Setif, Ravoisié wrote:

The lucky situation of Setif, its healthy climate, wealthy territory, important central position and the peaceful tribe character in the surroundings, would soon and definitely grasp the Government's attention to overcome the sole use of the place as a military settlement. A warehouse of goods and ammunition, so useful as it has

been and could be in the future, should soon form a population centre. Indeed, a large number of families have already come to gather there and began thus to found a city that will take more importance. (Ravoisié, 1842: 70)

Setif was originally a Roman city called Sitifis and, according to Rocca (1903), the French decided to found a city on the ruins of that holy site and took the Byzantine tower (today called Citadel) and the existing fountains as pre-existences. A few years after the French invasion of Algeria, Maréchal Bugeaud imposed, in 1841, the application of rules concerning land concession and the creation of settlements that were crucial for the official policy of colonization in the country.

During the colonial era, Setif was described as a boom town with 'fervour':

(It) became a full-fledged commune in 1854 and then the sous-prefecture of the Constantine département (regional district) in 1858. Located some 130 kilometres west of Constantine, Setif became by the early twentieth century a crossroads for regional trade and experienced a period of great economic and demographic growth after the First World War. In the thirties, it was an urban community of just over thirty thousand residents, growing to 53 thousand towards the end of the fifties and to 96 thousand just before Algerian Independence in 1962. (Camborieux, 1978: 122)

According to Belguidoum (1985), the history of Setif shows that in this city the urban meridian street – the 'Souq' – and the transhumance pathway that cross the colonial centre are both part of the centre, and run perpendicular to the east-west axis which connects Algiers to Constantine. Until 1926, the city of Setif was enclosed within walls, with four gates: Algiers, Constantine, Biskra and Bejaia Gates. There were then two important parts of the city: the civilian quarter in the south and the military quarter in the north. This typical colonial centre, with a regular plan, has still today large shopping streets, arcades, squares, and public gardens.

After independence, 'the colonial centres preserved their commercial functions and substituted the middle classes who left to the quarters of detached houses. The existence of central amenities, public transportation and other factors contributed to make them central places' (Boumaza, 1995: 21). For instance, until recently, the old city centre of Setif represented approximately one third of the total local commercial activities. Independence has only suppressed the ethnic dichotomy, without deleting the business character: the outskirts and countryside areas remain directly dependent on this centre and by extension on the colonial core.

The RN5 (Route Nationale No. 5) became the main street in all colonial cities it crossed and for that reason became a generator for the rest of their urban form. These urban centres created during the colonial period as small towns or villages later became medium-sized cities. These initial cities of the nineteenth century adopted a plan that aimed to serve primarily the colonial needs. Nonetheless, these historic centres revealed a strong ability to accommodate modern life amenities, which explains to a large extent the long life of the urban system based on these cities.

The fast growth of Setif after 1970 did not allow enough time for the urban form of the old city to be taken as a reference. This resulted in contrasted discontinuity between the urban pattern in the old city and that of the new urban districts built during the period of rapid urban expansion. The historic centre is now mostly a decaying inner city, although the original urban form still exists with its main structural and defining elements.

Currently with more than 300,000 inhabitants, Setif is among Algeria's largest cities. Positioned at a geographical crossroads, Setif has developed, in addition to industrial and agricultural activities, commercial and administrative functions. The city of Setif expanded in all directions but, as happened elsewhere in the world (Whitehand and Morton, 2006), the fringe-belt was the area that experienced the most profound socioeconomic changes. Nonetheless, even the city centre suffered rapid changes in a short period, in terms of land use, building form, and traffic.

Setif, as a French colonial city, was divided into military and civilian quarters. In addition, traditional houses were perceived as social memories of their previous inhabitants. This old civilian core, commonly called 'Bled' in the popular language, remains the dominating centre with a kind of symbolic value acquired over its long history. This is a city centre not only at the local level, but also at a regional scale. Its urban fabric is characterized by a dense grid framework. A regular shape traces the boundary of the 'intra-muros' city and provides the same regularity for the layout of land plots and street patterns.

In general, public buildings – city hall, banks, theatre (Figure 8.1), church and mosque, school, and so on – are located on two main streets historically forming the Decumanus and Cardo axis of the Roman city. These main shopping streets are architecturally distinguished with arcades, whereas other public facilities – central market, post office, movie theatres, and so on – occupy secondary streets. Yet, it is interesting to notice the exceptional case of the synagogue located in front of the historic Citadel and behind the Jewish blocks.



Figure 8.1 The municipal theatre of Setif after the 1990s rehabilitation works

Source: The authors, August 2014

The regular urban structure of the civilian quarter continued to support the various transformations implied by the changing ways of urban life, while it conserved its grid form with the main structuring elements: streets and squares, blocks and parcels, buildings. This confirms the process of urban changes discussed by Moudon (1987: 41), ‘streets, buildings and parcels are classified as they change over the life of a settlement. Together, these elements define not only the anatomy of a city, but also the processes by which it is formed and reformed over the course of history’. Administrative and cultural amenities were concentrated in the old city, but their recent expansion imposed their relocation elsewhere in the city and left behind buildings transformed to appendices with the same type of function. However, commerce and services are now invading these streets whatever their rank in the urban network and even penetrating the heart of the building blocks when possible. The liberal professions are remarkably the most demanding of space in the central area of the city, which is losing its resident population. A spontaneous process of urban renewal is taking place in Setif but this slow transformation is still occurring without a significant change in the original urban structure and in general it takes place in accordance with city planning rules. At the same time, the inhabitants of the suburbs seem to be back again in the city centre, this time mainly as their place of leisure and free time.

Located on the Roman historic site of the city, the Military Camp was transformed into an amusement park in 1986 and hence lost its initial layout – except the north-south axis which was preserved as a pedestrian precinct. The Citadel Park in Setif is a holy site telling the entire history of the city. Having been a twilight zone for a decade, this space was finally rejuvenated to avoid the alternative of becoming a high density area, an option praised by developers and speculators. This renewal is contributing socially, economically, physically, and aesthetically to revitalize the local urban environment and tourism in the city. This genuine lung, occupying over 35 hectares, gave the city a national ecological reputation. Keeping, in the heart of the historic district, the Citadel as a public space was an important and positive policy option, welcomed by the city's inhabitants: 'People and especially children from Setif and all over the region come daily to enjoy themselves at this leisure place. However, the social and economic impact of this park in the city and its "influence" on surrounding territories is great' (Madani and Diafat, 2010: 7).

Setif: Key Trends in the Urban Process

The introduction of the market economy in Algeria in the last few decades provoked important social and physical changes in the city. These were followed by changes in lifestyles and in cultural values. Three main trends seem to have emerged in connection with these structural changes in the economic and social organization: the expansion of informal urbanization, urban sprawl in the periphery, and densification of the historic centre. One of the consequences was the increasing non-compliance with current building regulations by an increasing number of residents. Such a discrepancy between urban regulations and social practices reflects the lack of engagement in the process of decision making by large sections of the population. The attitude of a large part of the population is to get the building permit first, then build in their own way later on. And since this practice became generalized, the control and management of the situation became quite problematic for the local authorities.

Urban Sprawl

The town of Setif is located 300 km east of Algiers and is situated at an altitude of 1,100 m. It is served by a road network of national importance: the national road RN 5 linking Algiers to Constantine, the RN 9 linking Bejaia to Setif, the RN 28 between Biskra and Setif, the RN 75 between Batna and Setif. This key road network is complemented by the new Motorway Constantine – Algiers through Setif and by Ain Arnat Airport. In addition, Setif is one of the closest towns in Algeria to this east-west motorway. The *Wilaya* (Province) of which Setif is part has an estimated population of more than 1,490,000 and an estimated area of 6,504 square kilometres. This regional context has allowed Setif to benefit from major regional programmes and projects.

After independence, urban development was limited to new constructions and neglected the preservation of the old and historic parts of the city. These new urban development programmes extended the urban area, which jumped from 285 hectares in 1960 to 313 hectares in 1966, and 2,210 hectares in 1995. Urban growth in Setif was therefore merely a result of continuous urbanization and an accumulation of different plans: plotting, mass housing ZHUN (*zone d'habitat urbain nouvelle*), industrial areas, economic activity districts, large facility structures, and urban renewal and restructuring of the existing urban fabric.

Setif is now a large city, an urban agglomeration that has spread in all directions, as a result of different political, economic and spatial orientations. During the last 25 years, the population of the city of Setif grew from 168,000 in 1988 to nearly 215,000 in 1998 and 252,000 in 2008, while the population of the *Commune* (Municipality) of Setif grew from 186,000 in 1988 to 239,195 in 1998 and 287,574 in 2008 (Table 8.1). In the same year, the housing stock reached 54,411 housing units. Setif now has 300,000 inhabitants and aims to become a metropolis through the implementation of several major regional and national rank projects. Setif has also become one of the wealthiest cities in Algeria.

Land consumption in the period 1966–1977 increased from 338.0 ha to 839.8 ha with an average of 50.18 ha per year. This post-independence growth is explained by the massive rural exodus after the war of liberation. Among other factors that strongly influenced this process, the following seem to have been

critical: the implementation of the Plan of Constantine, the emergence of new housing programmes (*grands ensembles* – mass housing) on the outskirts of town and the new industrial zone. In the period 1977–1988, land consumption increased from 839.8 to 1,335.1 ha, with an annual average of 49.5 ha per year. This period saw a marked trend in consumption of urban space especially since the early 1980s. In part, this was due to new housing programmes (*grands ensembles*) and municipal housing estates and the ZHUN programmes. In the period 1988–1998, land consumption increased from 1,335.1 ha to 2,285.0 ha with an annual average of 95.0 ha per year. This rapid expansion of the city, with a growth rate of 2.31 per cent, was due to several factors: the development and expansion of the market economy and the opportunities it created for the development of real estate activity, housing developments through the Land Agency and other industrial projects, the rural exodus from the northern part for security reasons, and the lack of development projects to retain the population in the southern part.

Finally, in the period 1998–2008, land use increased from 2,285 ha to 3,377 ha with an average of 109.2 ha per year and a growth rate of 1.86 per cent. This significant urban expansion is the result of several factors: the improved security situation which has allowed populations to remain in their home place, the creation of major projects such as the two new university campuses, sports centre, and medical complex, the huge investment in and provision of services, and the emergence of new secondary urban centres – former rural nuclei that reached urban status in this period, some of which even have over 10,000 inhabitants, as is the case of Farnatou, Ain Trick and others.

Table 8.1 Urban population growth and land consumption in the municipality of Setif

National census (year)	Population	Area (ha)	Land consumption (ha)	Average annual consumption (ha/year)
1966	88,212	338.0		
1977	126,020	839.8	(1966–1977) 501.8	50.18
1988	186,000	1,335.1	(1977–1988) 495.3	49.53
1998	239,195	2,285.0	(1988–1998) 950.0	95.00
2008	287,574	3,377.0	(1998–2008) 1,092.0	109.2.0

Source: Master Plan – PDAU (*Plan directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme*) Intercommunal de Sétif, URBASE (Centre d'Etudes et de Réalisations en Urbanisme – Sétif), 2010.

Densification in the Historic Centre

Associated with urban sprawl in the fringe-belts, another form of growth is taking place in the inner city as the densification of pre-existing buildings and land plots takes place. Two forms can be distinguished. First, the macro-densification over a single large area, for example the military wasteland transformed into an amusement park, industrial warehouses, or some squatter settlements, such as the Omar Deggou quarter, called Andreoli before clearance. Second, the micro-densification that occurs at the scale of a single parcel through the demolition of a small building, usually a traditional house, to obtain a vacant land in order to insert another building and stick with the maximum built surface allowed by the planning legislation.

A large number of old buildings in the historic centre increased their density in order to create more areas for commercial activities. The ground floor and sometimes underground spaces accommodate these activities. The buildings of colonial architecture that used to represent the different public facilities in the city centre needed more space to satisfy their function. Thus, new buildings with greater space were built out of the old city in the 1980s to meet current and future demand. Yet, commerce and services continue to be the main activities in this central area, which is constantly visited by large crowds of visitors.

The renewal of some public amenities in the historic centre took place only after a fire or after the earthquake of 1975, but rarely due to the advanced deterioration of the buildings. Building the whole plot area, or even merging sometimes two plots, as happened in the case of the shopping centre 'Ifrikia', ex-cinéma variétés, and the 24 apartments built in front of the market, is quite common. This densification is

often characterized by commercial activities on the ground floor, and offices and accommodation on the upper floors. Renovated private constructions are often of collective colonial 'Hara' type (see below).

The 1983 legislation that allowed the sale of public property also allowed new owners to transform or even to reconstruct these buildings. Even so, problems associated with the lack of maintenance in the newly private housing stock, mainly in the tenements, continue to be a characteristic of the historic centre. The practice of co-ownership made the process of rehabilitation more complex and the development of commercial activities seriously diminished the social character of the old centre. The dysfunction, deterioration and squalor of the old urban fabric led to the development of renewal and consolidation actions. The inexistence of an official record of the historic heritage in the city centre is clearly a constraint for the development of urban renewal initiatives. Furthermore the lack of planning studies concerning the old city centre is in part responsible for the prevailing informal or rough urban management practised in this period across the historic centre of Setif.

Physical and Functional Changes in the Urban Structure

As a crossroads city, Setif has a great impact on the economic life at the regional scale and thus attracts a large number of investors and visitors. However, the need to expand the administrative and cultural infrastructures traditionally located in the centre, 'imposed their relocation elsewhere in the city and left behind them buildings transformed into appendices with the same type of function, but rarely changed their usage' (Diafat and Madani, 1999: 13).

There are two street types: main streets (10–12 m wide and an 8 m sidewalk bordered with trees, including 4 m under arcades) and secondary streets (6–8 m wide and a 1.2 m sidewalk). However, only the first belt (a *non-aedificandi* zone under the colonial occupation period) around the old city has changed and become a 15–20 m wide avenue. The main street became the heart of the city centre and a consumer marketplace. It is a shopping and meeting place crystallized with some fine architecture, providing an intimate human scale and its own sense of time and space. It is a part of the collective memory of the city – as is the case of Rue Constantine in Setif (Figure 8.2).

The civilian quarter conserved its grid framework, and its main structuring elements, while the military quarter was transformed into an amusement park, losing its initial configuration, keeping nonetheless the linkage between the central and northern quarters of the city. The old civilian core with a regular urban structure is composed of three superposed elements: blocks broken into plots, streets, or squares and buildings. Blocks have generally a rectangular shape with two average size types: 35 m × 65 m, and 60 m × 80 m. Some of these blocks, due to their specific position, slightly change their forms and dimensions, such as wall blocks, gate blocks, 'open' blocks, and so on.

There are two plot types in the central core: regular plots of a rectangular or square shape spread out into the city and irregular plots following their location in the wall blocks. Current transformations, concerning initial plot subdivisions, affect mainly the parcelling of inherited plots between family members. In some cases, the plot can drastically reach only 5 m in width or even less.

There are three main colonial housing types. First, the Hara (Harats in plural), a traditional and collective colonial house organized around a central space, the courtyard, where services are shared. Second, the individual colonial house, built on a small plot, spatially organized like the Hara, but occupied by a single family. Finally, the 'Immeuble de rapport', that is a mid-rise type of colonial building. This collective housing is composed of apartments organized around a central space.

The buildings in the neighbourhood where Muslim and Jewish merchants pre-dominated (Rue Valée, Rue d'Aumale, and Rue d'Isly along the Rue Général Sarrail and around the covered market) were of various architectural styles:

The two prevailing ones pointed up the plural nature of this small colonial town. The first consisted of three-to-four-storey apartment buildings with wrought iron balconies and represented a European-type lifestyle (immeubles de rapport). The second type was a low-storey building (Hara) consisting of an inner courtyard surrounded by several rooms that communicated with one another. In this latter type of building, a single gate gives access to the whole house. The inner rooms open onto the courtyard or the balconied gallery; apartments consisting of several adjacent rooms have doors into the rooms next door. (Bahloul, 1996: 13–14)



Figure 8.2 Rue Constantine in Setif and its rich colonial architecture

Source: The authors, August 2014

High density at the ground level is the main transformation affecting buildings in this part of the city centre. This process affects mainly buildings of the Hara type, where the ground floor often becomes a space for commercial activities, which often extend to the underground floor. The occupants of the Harats and of the old houses suspect local authorities will not guarantee or will not be able to keep them living in the centre as they are no longer in charge of the urban renewal process, which is in the hands of new real estate speculators. The voices of these citizens, for whom the right to housing is weakened, have been joined by the critics of other independent actors (architects, lawyers, geographers, and sociologists). Local authorities are accused of being in favour of the market forces behind the real estate development.

These constructions have resisted cultural changes associated with the move from the period of French occupation to the post-independence period, but have so far not resisted so well the changes imposed by the economic shift from socialism to a capitalist economy. High density has been promoted, especially during the last 15 years, a direct consequence of the development of the market economy in Algeria, a process in part led by the newly rich owners who tend to rebuild the homes they purchased, increasing therefore the density of the area. These urban renewal actions, favoured by the 'laissez-faire' attitude of the local authorities, allow developers to get rid of the old leases and poor tenants who continue to pay rent well below the current market. The policy of 'laissez-faire' seems rather favourable to the speculative market and real estate development. This approach, however, does not allow people to take part in decisions related to their quality of life. The public administration's disengagement in the management of these urban renewal projects is disturbing and has certainly a negative impact on the quality of the urban environment. The attraction of a wealthier population is undeniable due to the proximity to the historic city centre and its facilities, and this urban attractiveness makes possible the realization of profitable real estate transactions.

Due to the fast and deep changes experienced by the city of Setif, the historic centre became in the last decades a decaying inner city. However, the original urban form still exists with its permanent structures, densification at the ground level being the main change affecting the city centre and in particular the Hara and colonial house typology. Their ground floors and cellars frequently became spaces for commercial activities (Diafat and Madani, 1997). However, since the mid-1980s most of the administrative and cultural amenities (City Hall, main post office, Museum, Central Bank, and so on) moved from the historic centre to the peri-central area but did not liberate the old buildings for other uses. In some cases, these unoccupied buildings have been closed for long periods, suffering therefore from decay and squalor. The Military Quarter has experienced the most successful transformation so far that has occurred in the central core in recent decades. Its green open space attracts visitors from the whole region around Setif and became the second national landmark in the city after the iconic fountain Ain Fouara (Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3 Icon of Setif: the monumental fountain Ain Fouara (erected in 1898; sculpture by Francis de Saint Vidal)

Source: The authors, August 2014

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