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THE URBAN EVOLUTION OUAD EL HAD: FROM A MINOR URBAN EXTENSION TO AN INFAMOUS AND ILLICIT NEIGHBORHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Informal housing represents a complex phenomenon with far-reaching implications for urban development and social equity, it is characterized by its spontaneous and unauthorized nature, it has emerged as a significant phenomenon in urban areas worldwide and usually arises a multitude of socio-economic challenges such as rapid urbanization, poverty, and as in our case, rural migration, Therefore, understanding the spatial evolution of informal settlements is crucial for designing more equitable and sustainable living environments.

That was the case of "Ouad El Had", a neighborhood that may be considered as one of the focal points in metropolis of Constantine, informal housing started as an extension, an illicit urbanization due to rural-to-urban migration led to the perpetuation of informal settlements on what was in that time the outskirts of city, Nowadays, housing shortages caused the proliferation of informal settlements, those settlements presented a chance to obtain a house in the social housing program given by the government leading it to get repopulated every time and after several attempts to evacuate the entire zone starting from 2012 to this actual day.

Our paper offers an in-depth analysis of the spatial and temporal evolution to the informal housing situated in the neighborhood "Cit  des Fr res Abbas" (Ouad El Had) and its evolution within urban and social contexts with the objective of understanding the complex case of this neighborhood that led to its repopulation after every evacuation or displacement and identifying the urban model generated of during this process.

KEYWORDS:

Informal Housing, Urban Diagnosis, Social Integration, Housing Strategies, Housing Relocation

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Introduction.

Although there are different levels of informal housing, many definitions emphasize informality of occupation and non-compliance with land-use plans as the main characteristics, which represents a significant challenge in urban areas due to its spontaneous and unauthorized nature where units are typically arranged in a haphazard manner, lacking proper infrastructure and basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity.

Human settlements, which for a variety of reasons do not meet requirements for legal recognition (and have been constructed without respecting formal procedures of legal ownership, transfer of ownership, as well as construction and urban planning regulations), exist in their respective countries and hamper economic development. (Cheikh & Touahri, 2023)

While there is significant regional diversity in terms of their manifestation, these settlements are mainly characterized by informal or insecure land tenure, inadequate access to basic services, both social and physical infrastructure and housing finance. (Vienna Declaration, 2004, p. 1)

The most immediate facet of urban poverty is undoubtedly expressed by the informal housing of the most deprived social categories. Compared with the housing of other social categories, popular housing is a good indicator of poverty and exclusion. Indeed, it is easy to see that these informal settlements, which defy official urban planning, reflect socio-spatial inequalities and injustices. Housing conditions for families, alarming under-equipment, difficulties in getting children into school and poor employment opportunities are the main indicators of this poverty. These indicators reinforce the segregation processes that affect many Algerian cities. (Souiah, 2010)

Algeria in the 1950's was still a colonized country suffering of economic disparities and poverty among the Algerians pushed marginalized populations to seek shelter in informal settlements where land is often available at low or no cost, therefore, spontaneous housing takes two forms: on the one hand, slums or informal settlements, built with salvaged materials and without any services (their number is decreasing) and on the other hand, the more numerous hard-built neighborhoods authorities, who refer to them as informal housing. (Belmalle, 2014)

Together, these two types occupy an important place in the Algerian urban landscape, some of these neighborhoods served as a refuge for people fleeing the countryside, developed since the independence on the outskirts of industrial centers and other large cities, informal slums were home to job seekers, nevertheless, in recent years, it become the shining light in the face of the inefficiency and inadequacy of housing programs initiated by the state since the 1970s, Constantine, one of one of Algeria's major cities, is a perfect illustration of this situation, with its high levels of this housing type and the difficulties of dealing with it. (Bouteche & Lazri, 2020)

1. Research Issue.

Informal housing has always been a matter of concern for different authorities, since its chaotic aspect makes it a center of social and security problems.

The area studied has a strategic location and a great impact on the city, which encouraged us to study the history and evolution of informal housing, especially because the neighborhood is a hybrid between legal and illegal, as well as the multiple relocations of residents of the informal neighborhood over the years to different areas of the wilaya and through multiple housing programs.

the illicit housing of ouad elhad presents an interesting sample for such a study because it is the result of the combined effect of several factors and social layers, created due to rural migration and low income job seekers in the 1987s, an available land closer to the city's center attracting residents from the neighboring wilayas and becoming over the years, a settlement which in some cases offers the possibility of obtaining a decent social house in the relocation housing programs.

2. Methodology.

We will be using a comparative methodology starting by a longitudinal research method into the evolution of this district, using satellite photos obtained from google earth since 2003 highlighting the repopulated zones and extensions in every period.

Secondly, we will compare the previous results with obtained results of the qualitative research; a survey distributed for 100 inhabitants of the informal settlements and the rest of the neighborhood, this comparison will provide insights into the complexities of informal urban patterns and socio-economic context that led to its infamous reputation.

Finally, and to fully grab the context of this neighborhood informal housing, we conducted an interview with some of the native inhabitants of the informal settlement where we questioned the history behind it and the reasons of why it still not erased despite the several operations of housing relocation over the past years.

By conducting this study, we expect to obtain a better understanding of the informal neighborhood “Oued Elhad”; a focal points in the urban dynamic of the third Algerian metropolis, also to discuss the housing strategy conducted in this settlement and its implications on the entire urban environment.

3. Materials.

Our approach to the subject started as basic methodology to familiarize with the informal settlement using satellite images to limit the area and explore its history by comparing the growth of the built surface over the years, after that we visited the settlement, conducting interviews with the locals gave us some answers to the questions that we asked in the first approach, finally, and by using an informative survey distributed via to 100 persons varying between former and actual inhabitants of the neighborhood we managed to obtain a complete image of the problem.

4. Results and Discussions.

Located between the Sidi Mabrouk and Daksi neighbourhoods in the north east of Constantine, the densely populated Frères Abbes housing neighborhood, better known as Oued El Had, stretches its tentacles as far as the Sarkina river, it was built in the 1960s, land was given to workers coming from the surrounding dairas of Constantine such as Elhamma Where the neighborhood was built legally until 1988, the land near the “Oued” was the perfect place for the ones seeking jobs and mainly safety and the informal settelement was created due to rural immigration in illegal form.

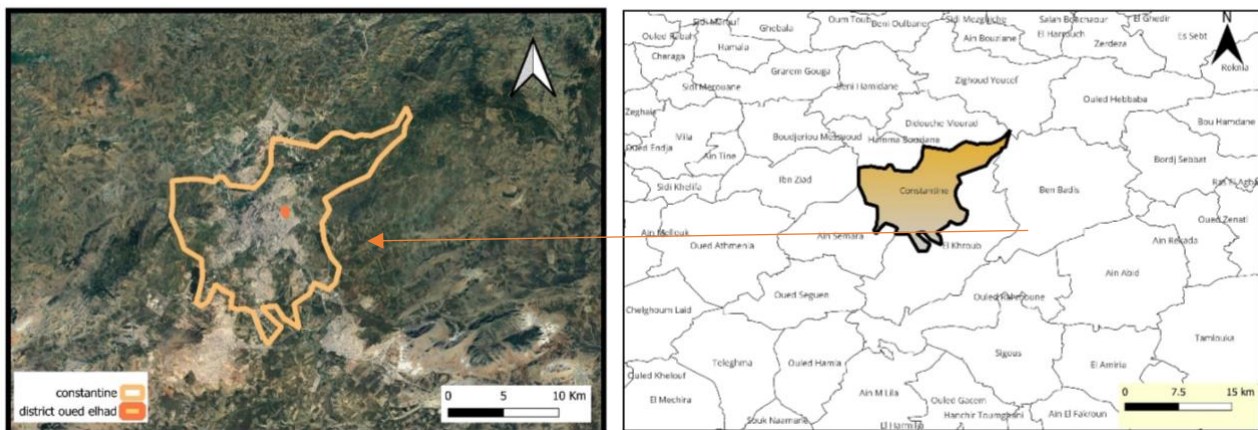


Fig. 1 – The localization of the neighborhood “Oued Elhad” in the city of Constantine

The construction of the informal neighborhood began in 1986 and that area was chosen by the first arrivals because it was on the outskirts of the city before the expansions of the Mona neighborhood, most of them were from the neighboring cities of Constantine, and the construction was done according to the clusters resulting from the original displacement area with old materials after years and in 1990 the neighborhood was named the neighborhood of two months due to the two months of temporary imprisonment that the original residents of the informal neighborhood were punished for building without ownership or permit and doors and windows were removed to urge them to leave.

The presence of the neighborhood on the banks of the city and its chaos made it a labyrinth for non-residents, especially during the black decade, when it was difficult to penetrate or raid it, which prompted officials to connect the neighborhood to electricity despite the difficulty of the matter, as well as paving some main roads in the center to facilitate movement by car.



Fig. 2 – photo of the informal housing “Ouad El Had”

The informal neighborhood continued to grow and attract residents, especially as it gained a reputation for being dangerous due to the difficulty of getting around and security issues, which were exacerbated by the presence of clusters of residents that became more like miniature gangs based on geographical affiliation.



Fig. 3 – Satellite images of the neighborhood from 2003 to 2009

The first relocation took place in 2013, as shown in the picture, where only the roofs were removed and about half of the neighborhood's residents were relocated, despite their total inventory a year earlier by the so-called neighborhood committee.

Within less than a year, the process of rebuilding, or rather, re-roofing and selling them by their occupants or other people to newcomers, whose reasons were radically different compared to those before them, as most of them were looking for an opportunity to obtain social housing, and this is what they confirmed to us when we interviewed them.



Fig. 4 – Satellite images of the informal settlement before and after the 1st housing relocation 2009-2013

The second relocation process was in 2019, which was more comprehensive than the previous one, and the majority of them were relocated to the new city of Ali Mengli, but the demolition of the houses was not carried out directly for political reasons, which gave many the opportunity to reconstruct them, but after the spread of the Covid virus, they were not reconstructed as quickly as before.



Fig. 5 – Satellite images of the neighborhood from 2013 to 2019

The last relocation took place in 2024 to Ain Obeid and the new city, and most of the residences were demolished by the municipality, electricity lines were cut, and roads were filled in.



Fig. 6 – Satellite images of the informal settlement before and after the 2nd housing relocation 2019-2023



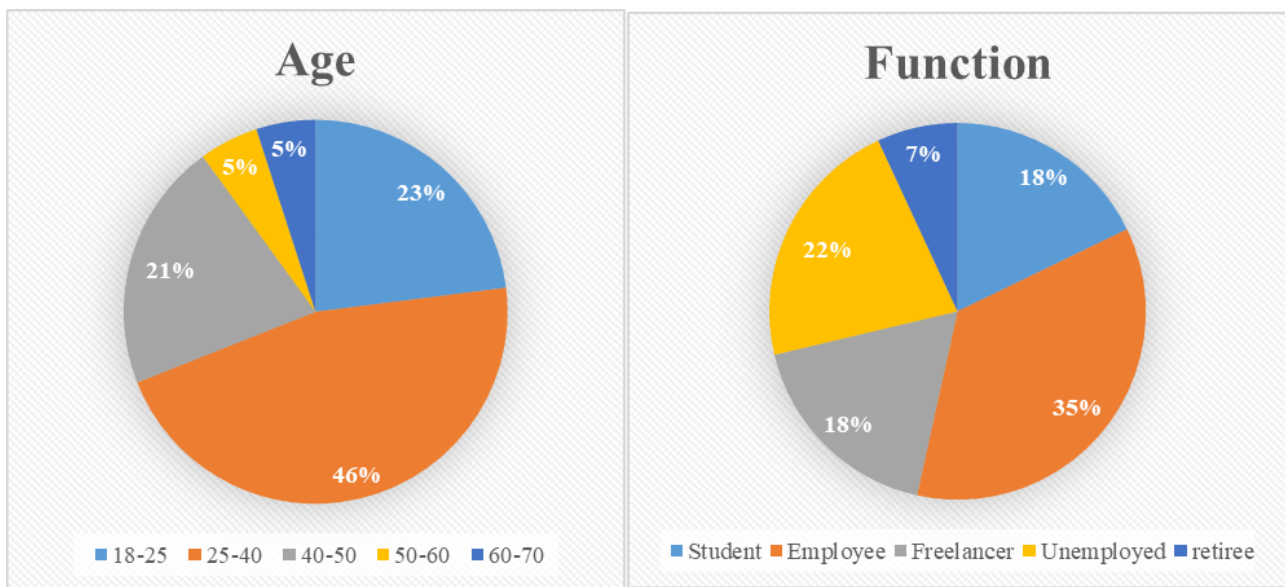
Fig. 7 – Photo of the current state of the construction in the informal settlement after the last housing relocation April 2024

As for the urban model, in these declassified areas of the city, low-income families, whether from an old or modern urban background, with the practice of self-construction, have been able to build their own houses, from the point of view of productive urban planning, the layout of the streets is curved rather than straight, the house is a “houach” type with blind walls overlooking the public space (the street), and the only openings open to an inner courtyard in order to preserve the family's privacy. Spatial proximity is guided by family ties or similar geographical origins, although there are differences in the layout of the plots.

In some cases, the curve gives way to a straight line, because someone is urbanising the area and drawing an informal allotment scheme “the illegal allotment developer” who is usually one of the native inhabitants of the settlement that have access to land and a certain social status allowing him to control the process.

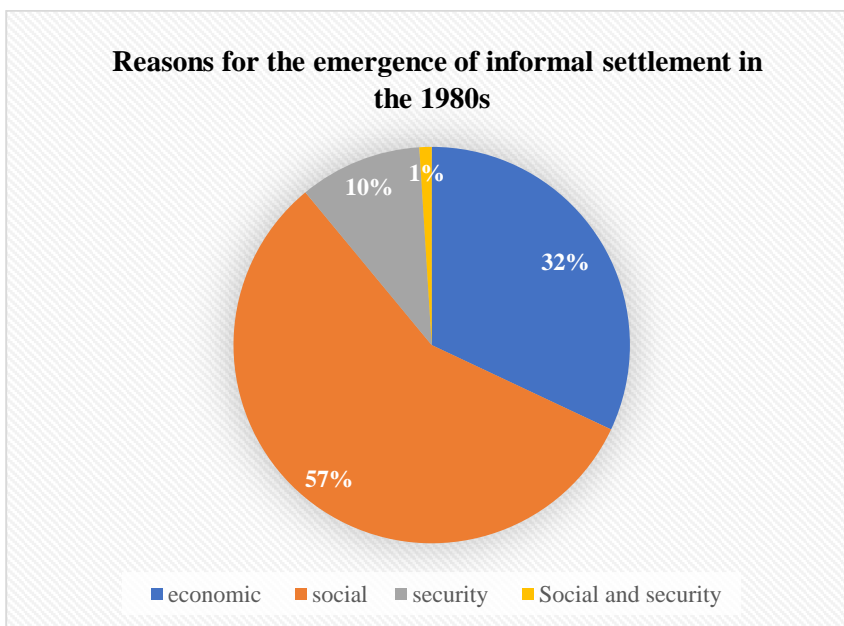
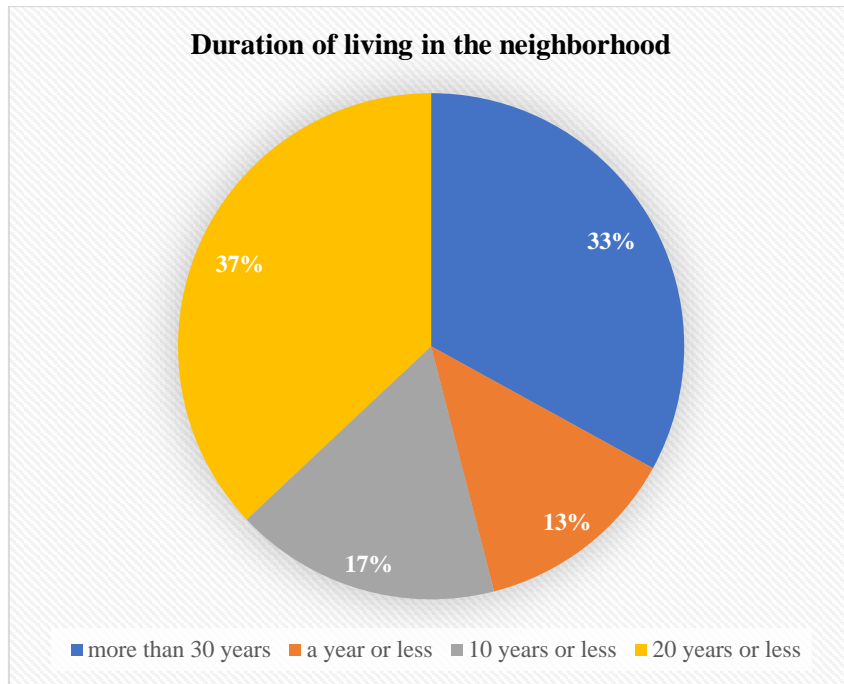
After conducting the study from a historical perspective through satellite images and interviews with residents, we distributed 100 questionnaires to residents of the chaotic neighborhood and its surroundings (the questionnaire link is included at the bottom of the article). Initially, we inquired about age, occupation, length of residence in the neighborhood, and previous place of residence. The answers were that the previous place of residence in the state of Constantine and in the neighborhood itself was different from the information collected in the previous part.

Poor housing conditions are not the only characteristic of these areas of informal housing, Unemployment is particularly high and job insecurity more evident than elsewhere especially within younger generation suggesting the hypothesis the impact of this informal settlements on the social aspect of its residents.



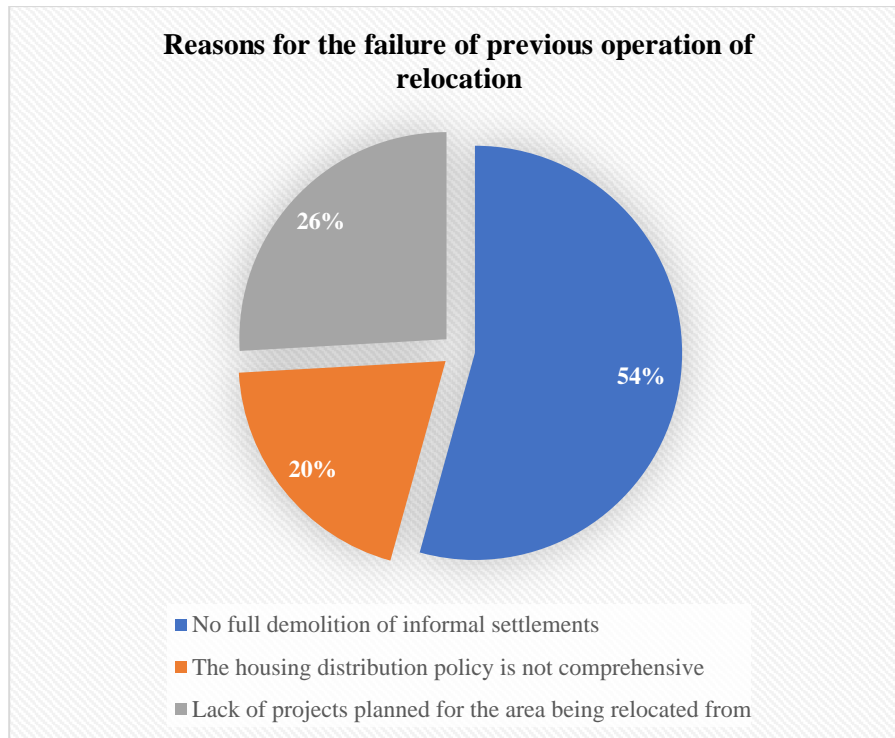
More than 65% of the questioned sample were born in the wilaya of Constantine or in its surrounding wilayas such as Skikda and Mila confirming the hypothesis that it is no longer a situation of rural migration of people seeking jobs and security but a chance to obtain an apartment of the programmed housing relocation operations in the informal settlement.

Over 80% of the questioned sample were already living in the wilaya of Constantine before moving to the neighborhood where 72% in the municipality of Constantine also confirming that the actual inhabitants of the whole neighborhood are the result of internal migration or they are the second or third generation of previously rural migration and suggesting that the reasons for the regeneration of the informal settlement after each operation of relocation is due to other reasons then security and economy, therefore, the radical relocation is not the answer of this dilemma.



The answer for the question about the reasons on why the informal settlement continue to existence included: poverty, low per capita income, housing issues, but the most interesting answers for our study related to the uniqueness of the informal neighborhood in relation to other areas in the city and the lack of total demolition when relocating the informal settlement is done, also the strong community affiliation's sense that contributed to regenerating the settlement every time.

This is because most of the answers were for the second and even third generations of residents of the neighborhood. As for the reasons for the continued existence of the neighborhood and the problems present in it, most of the answers were based on social and security reasons over economic reasons. This confirms the transformation of the chaotic neighborhood from an opportunity to get closer to the city for work to an area with social groups and different security dimensions.



As for the question about the aspects of impact of the informal settlement of the rest of the neighborhood the answers reflected the non-integration of the two despite the fact that the informal settlement was created more than 30 years ago, this social situation effected also the urban model between the part of the neighborhood.

Questions were also asked about the harmony of living between the residents, and most of the answers supported the lack of harmony. This may be due to the fact that the population changes after every operation of housing relocation, and social reasons are not the only ones that push them to live in the informal neighborhood. A question was also asked about the effect of the informal part on the rest of the neighborhood, the answers differed between supporters of its great influence in terms of social aspect, as it gave a distorted view of the entire neighborhood, and other points of view that adopted its lack of influence as it was a somewhat isolated part from the rest of the neighborhood.

In general, the survey, and compared to the first part of the study, gives us a more modern idea about what the neighborhood is now. The reasons for its reconstruction differed, but the deportation operations did not follow that crucial change and this is what made us refuse the hypothesis of social and security reasons as the main reason for informal settlement's reconstruction each time, and confirm the hypothesis of the stagnation of the relocation operations and even demolition of the informal neighborhood, which is revived every time for various reasons.

5. Recommendations.

After processing the previously mentioned data and comparing them with the answers of the residents of the chaotic neighborhood and its surroundings, these recommendations come as a radical step to get rid of this neighborhood and exploit the land in projects that would have a positive impact on the state:

Total demolition and removal of all the housing that was moved to not be occupied by its reconstruction by new residents.

Carrying out an inventory immediately after the transfer of what remains of the housing.

Applying legal consequences on those responsible for rebuilding and selling these chaotic housing.

Cutting the illegal electricity suppliers for these housing once they are relocated.

Consolidating the lands and exploiting it by private properties or public equipment.

Changing the legal form of these constructions from informal housing that need to be relocated to an illegal housing that needs to be erased.

Conclusions.

An urban informal settlement is a densely populated area where housing is constructed without legal authorization or adherence to planning regulations. These settlements often lack basic services like water, sanitation, and electricity, and are characterized by inadequate infrastructure.

The informal housing settlement of Ouad El Had in Constantine, Algeria, highlights the complexities of urban development and social issues faced by marginalized communities.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions that prioritize affordable housing, infrastructure improvements, and community engagement, ultimately fostering a more inclusive urban environment.

the study employed a comparative methodology that combined satellite imagery analysis, surveys, and interviews to understand the evolution of the informal neighborhood "Ouad Elhad" since 1986. The findings revealed that the neighborhood developed due to its location on the city outskirts, with informal construction taking place without ownership or permits.

Despite relocation efforts, the neighborhood continued to expand, driven by social and geographic ties. Security concerns, particularly during the "black decade," solidified its reputation as a dangerous and chaotic area. The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the neighborhood's growth, its socio-economic dynamics, and the challenges posed by informal housing in the context of urban planning in Constantine.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the development of informal neighborhoods in declassified areas is heavily influenced by social and spatial factors, such as family ties and geographical origins. Despite attempts at urbanization and relocation, informal settlements persist, largely due to a combination of social, security, and logistical challenges.

The survey highlights a shift in the reasons for continued residence, showing that second- and third-generation inhabitants have different motivations, moving away from purely economic needs to social and security concerns. The lack of harmony among residents and the isolated nature of informal parts suggest ongoing complexity in the urban fabric, with relocation and demolition efforts proving ineffective in addressing the root causes of informal settlement regeneration.

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