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# DECENT HOUSING FOR ALL. THE CASE OF THE ALGERIAN CITY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*"Decent housing for all" this sentence carries several aspects which can be social, environmental, economic and sometimes even technical. Decent housing currently represents a major concern for which the Algerian authorities pay particular attention. At the same time, and in the face of this urgent demand for housing in Algeria, the city is neglected; entire neighborhoods do not have the necessary infrastructure and thus live in a most alarming sanitary situation, cohabiting with luxurious neighborhoods, where comfort in all its senses is present. For Algeria and for decades the ZHUNs (New Urban Habitat Zone) embody segregation and above all a stereotyped mass production, facing a spiral of social demand which in turn is fed by an exponential demographic growth. In reality, the problem lies mainly in the difficulty of balancing demand/supply, economic development/demographic growth. In this case, the problem of housing demand is still relevant and difficult to solve.*

**Keywords:** housing, decent, city, Algeria, ZHUN, habitat.

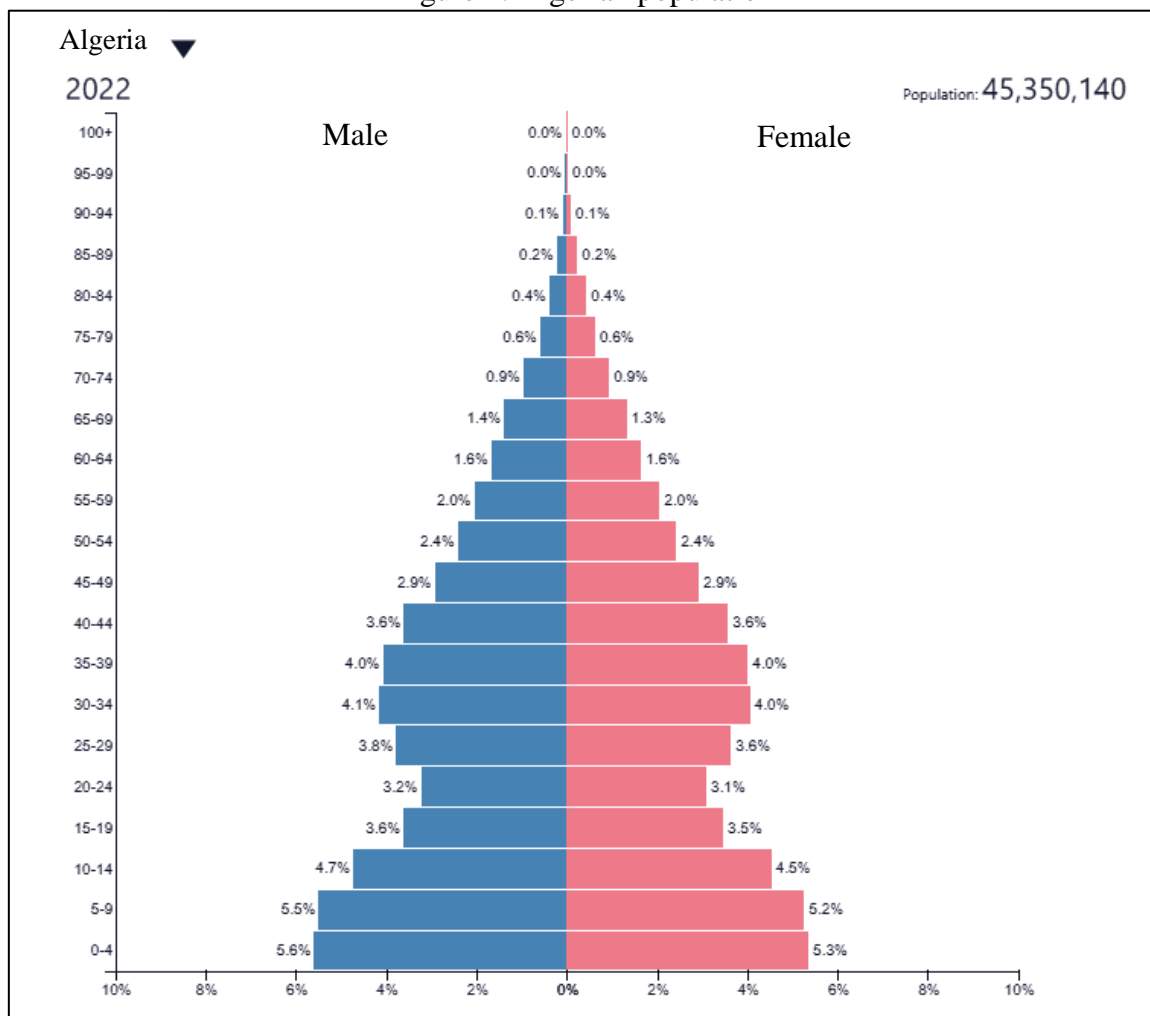
## 1- Introduction

In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about relocation operations. Hundreds of thousands of people are finally able to leave their cramped, unsanitary homes and move into newly built apartments. In reality, what has been a lifelong dream for many is often a nightmare. The new housing developments built in the far suburbs are inner ghettos, leading to the marginalization of a population that has never been welcome in the cities. This isolation and ostracism fuels the violence that youth face in their new environment (MELAH, S, 2016).

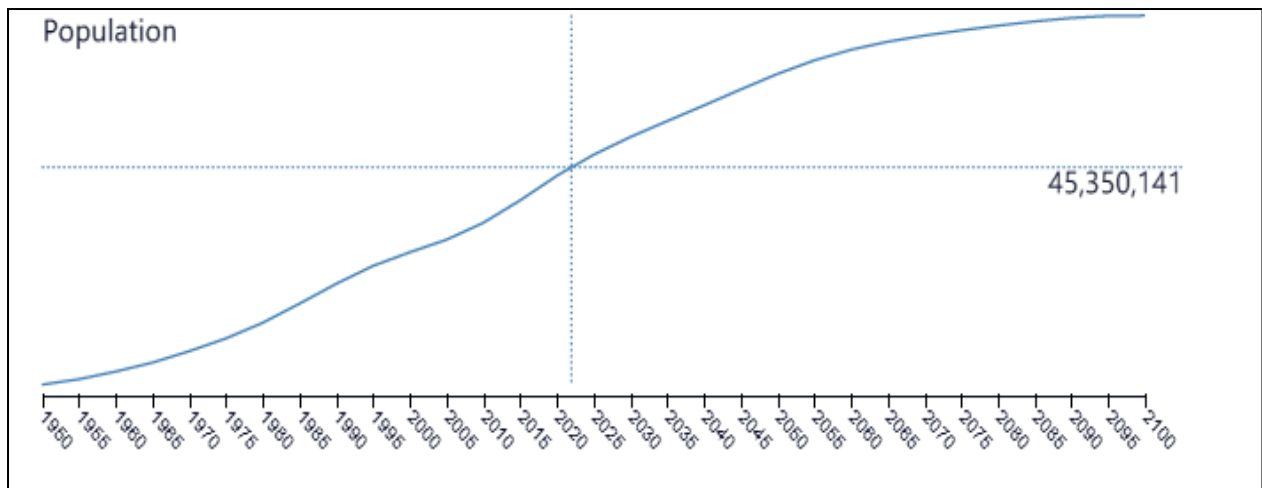
## 2- Historical Overview

The rural exodus, which began long before the country's independence in 1962, is not unique to Algeria. However, this phenomenon has become so widespread that more than 75% of the population lives in cities and more than 40% of this population is concentrated in the coastal fertile belt, which now represents only 4% of the country's territory. In other words, nearly 1% of the population occupies 87% of the territory. This exponential urbanization has therefore developed very rapidly, from 11 million inhabitants in 1962, to more than 44.6 million in 2021 and 45.35 in 2022 (figure 1).

Figure 1: Algerian population



Source : <https://www.populationpyramid.net/fr/alg%C3%A9rie/2022/>



Source : <https://www.populationpyramid.net/fr/alg%C3%A9rie/2022/>

Many newcomers cannot find suitable housing and have to cram into slums around city centers. The liquidation of precarious housing and slums has therefore always been a relevant issue. When the national liberation struggle began in November 1954, the colonial administration realized that urban apartheid was a threat to the established power. The famous "Constantine Plan" of 1958, decided by General de Gaulle, aimed to improve the living conditions of several tens of thousands of Algerians in order to free them from the grip of the nationalist uprising (MELAH, S, 2016).

With the departure of hundreds of thousands of Europeans at the time of the country's independence, Algerians in working-class neighborhoods or in the countryside occupied empty dwellings considered "spoils of war" nearly a million dwellings called "vacant properties". However, the Algerian administration did not ensure the means of their good management and maintenance and, twenty years later; it got rid of the heavily devastated stock by allowing tenants to acquire them at low prices. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of rural people arrived in the cities in hopes of a better life and crowded into slums (MELAH, S, 2016).

For decades, the public authorities ignored these populations, who claimed the same housing rights as their predecessors, settled in "vacant properties". Successive governments have not made housing policy a priority for over twenty years. It was only in the 1990s that the regime began to build programs that had been slowed by the years of terrorism. In the absence of sound urban design, informal settlements proliferated. Demographic pressure, as well as insecurity caused by terrorism against civilians in the countryside, drove hundreds of thousands of people to the cities. Living conditions have deteriorated to such an extent that in 2002, the average age of marriage for men increased from 27.7 years in 1987 to 33 years and for women from 23.7 to 30 years (MELAH, S, 2016).

It should be noted that 1.7 million apartments were delivered from 1999 to 2009, while the need was estimated by associations to be over 13 million in 2011. A unit for a new apartment, often no larger than 3 rooms (F3), houses an average of 6 people.

In addition to the needs to be taken into account, the precarious housing, estimated at 800,000 units, half of which must be destroyed, and the slums, mostly located in or near the cities, are estimated at more than half a million.

For many, it is a humiliating life of promiscuity, sometimes without running water or electricity, floods and mud in every bad weather, oppressive heat in summer, the presence of rats and vermin, and all the diseases caused by insanitary conditions (MELAH, S, 2016).

At the beginning of the 21st century, faced with the inaction of the authorities, as violence began to subside and public coffers filled, the population increasingly demanded access to decent housing.

Finally, in 2003, a vast program was launched to reduce precarious housing (terraced or basement dwellings and slums). This system provided for new public rental housing for the poorest and other forms of state-subsidized acquisition based on income, including participatory social housing, which requires a 20 percent personal contribution from the buyer and non-repayable assistance from the state as well.

The conditions of access to the construction of rural housing were adopted in 2013, they allow individuals residing in the municipality for more than 5 years and carrying out activities in rural areas to use public aid (MELAH, S, 2016).

Since 2005, thanks to the increase in oil revenues, the public authorities have launched a policy of total eradication of slums.

In 2008, a law was promulgated defining the rules and conditions for legalizing dwellings built illegally in the 1990s for five years in their precarious environment. The lists of allocated apartments are set by the local government, but the allocation methods are often opaque, arbitrary and corrupt. The press regularly reports violent riots when the lists are published, and more than one father has set himself on fire because he was not allocated housing. Families left behind sometimes end up on the street, their shacks razed (MELAH, S, 2016).

After decades of neglect, solving in a few years the problem of the poorly housed is a major challenge despite the opportunities offered by the oil windfall 2000-2014. A massive operation to resettle slum and precarious housing residents, planned years earlier, began in June 2014.

### **3- The strategy to eradicate precarious housing in Algeria**

In May 2008, the Minister of Housing and Urban Development announced that the state would build an average of 70,000 housing units per year to eliminate precarious housing. However, this ambitious plan did not correspond to the resources allocated to the department.

Indeed, the 2009 budget law set the budget at 9.9 billion dinars, far behind the agricultural budget of 210 billion dinars. However, the task is difficult, the site is huge and there are so many challenges. Because it is a national strategy for sustainable development that places the eradication of slums in a more global framework, that of achieving the Millennium

Development Goals. Otherwise, if the 553,000 precarious building units are not eradicated, how can we claim to be aligned with the views supported by the UN and integrated into the NEPAD (African Union Development Agency) framework?

In this respect, in order to standardize the strategy of exit from the crisis and to put the country at the international standards, the country has elaborated a global strategy whose basic matrix is the million housing units launched in the presidential plan in its various formulas: AADL (The National Agency for Housing Improvement and Development), social participative housing, social rental housing, rural housing, etc. Thus, 8% of the Algerian housing stock is concerned, or about 3 million citizens living in precarious housing (M.K, 2009).

As early as 2006, the President of the Republic made harsh comments about the ambiguity of the State's urban policy. He even referred to "improvisation and populism" to denounce the situation in the industry. Moreover, the representatives of the Ministry of the City have since disappeared. However, the housing stock has grown by nearly 45% over the past decade, but this has not translated into a project in harmony with the Algerian national personality (M.K, 2009).

As a result, soulless cities and villages look more like dormitory towns than integrated urban complexes. But the remaining questions concern the other side of the problem: the human side. How many beneficiaries of new homes have returned to their gurbis<sup>1</sup> to benefit from another resettlement operation?

This is where the question must be asked, because there is no reason to condemn the state or the public authorities when the primary responsibility for the persistence of this situation lies with the ordinary citizen.

Because of this common tendency to blame the government, the Algerian maintains this mentality of absolute right that he has to force the state, namely the Beylick<sup>2</sup>, to meet all his needs, first and foremost ensuring decent housing. The question is: When will this mentality be overcome? The problem still exists ...

#### **4- Precarious and illegal housing**

According to (Meskaldji Ghanima, 1994), spontaneous housing has two aspects in Algeria: on the one hand, shanty towns or precarious housing, built with salvaged materials and without any servicing (their number is decreasing), and on the other hand, the more numerous permanent neighborhoods, which are the object of the solicitude of the local and national authorities, who refer to them as illicit cities.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the French Larousse: (Arabic of Algiers gurbi, from the classical Arabic qurbā, kinship).in traditional North Africa, elementary dwelling, made of rectangular rooms, only lit by the door. (The gourbi is the habitat of the underprivileged classes.). Popular: A miserable and poorly maintained dwelling.

<sup>2</sup> According to the French Larousse: Beylick is a province that was ruled by a bey. Another definition of beylick is that which relates to a bey.

The author notes that these two types occupy an important place in the landscape of Algerian cities. These neighborhoods, born before or during the war of liberation, served as refuges for people fleeing the countryside. They have developed since independence at the gates of industrial centers and other large cities and have been housing job seekers in recent years, in the face of a private initiative that struggles with the inefficiency and inadequacy of housing programs initiated by the state in the 1970s.

At the time, a will was expressed in Algeria to limit this type of neighborhood by bringing radical solutions to this problem. But faced with the extent of the phenomenon and the impotence of the remedies, the discourse has changed and we are moving towards the recognition of the fait accompli of the regularization of the lawless cities. This new formula, although supported by a number of legal texts, cannot be applied without problems in this area. Meanwhile, the precarious housing is doomed to disappear.

## **5- Overview of the precarious housing, case of the city of Constantine**

Constantine, one of Algeria's major cities, is a perfect example of this situation due to the importance of the phenomenon of squatter settlements and the difficulties of managing them.

Precarious housing takes the form of small nuclei: 17 cases are located in Constantine and house 32,000 people (fig. n°2). It is located on the outskirts of the city, particularly in the East and North-East cities, they also penetrate inland and adjoin the banks of the Rhumel and Bou Merzoug rivers with a preference for land with state and communal status.

The "Bidonvilles"<sup>3</sup> are recognizable by their small size: the largest has 4,000 employees (located at one of the quarries of Faubourg Emir Abdelkader), while the smallest has only 160 people (at the foot of the buildings "CILOC"). They are also recognized by the heterogeneity of their building materials: "Toub"<sup>4</sup> or concrete blocks topped with corrugated sheets held together by old tires. They share with the environment the heavy mediocrity of their situation: sloping ground, under the roads along the wadis, quarries, near a public dump. The constructions were carried out without authorization of the day public ground "squatted"<sup>5</sup>, not connected to the technical networks (water, electricity, gas, sewers). All these negative aspects combined give the city an unpleasant appearance and character these slums to eradication operations. (Meskaldji Ghanima, 1994)

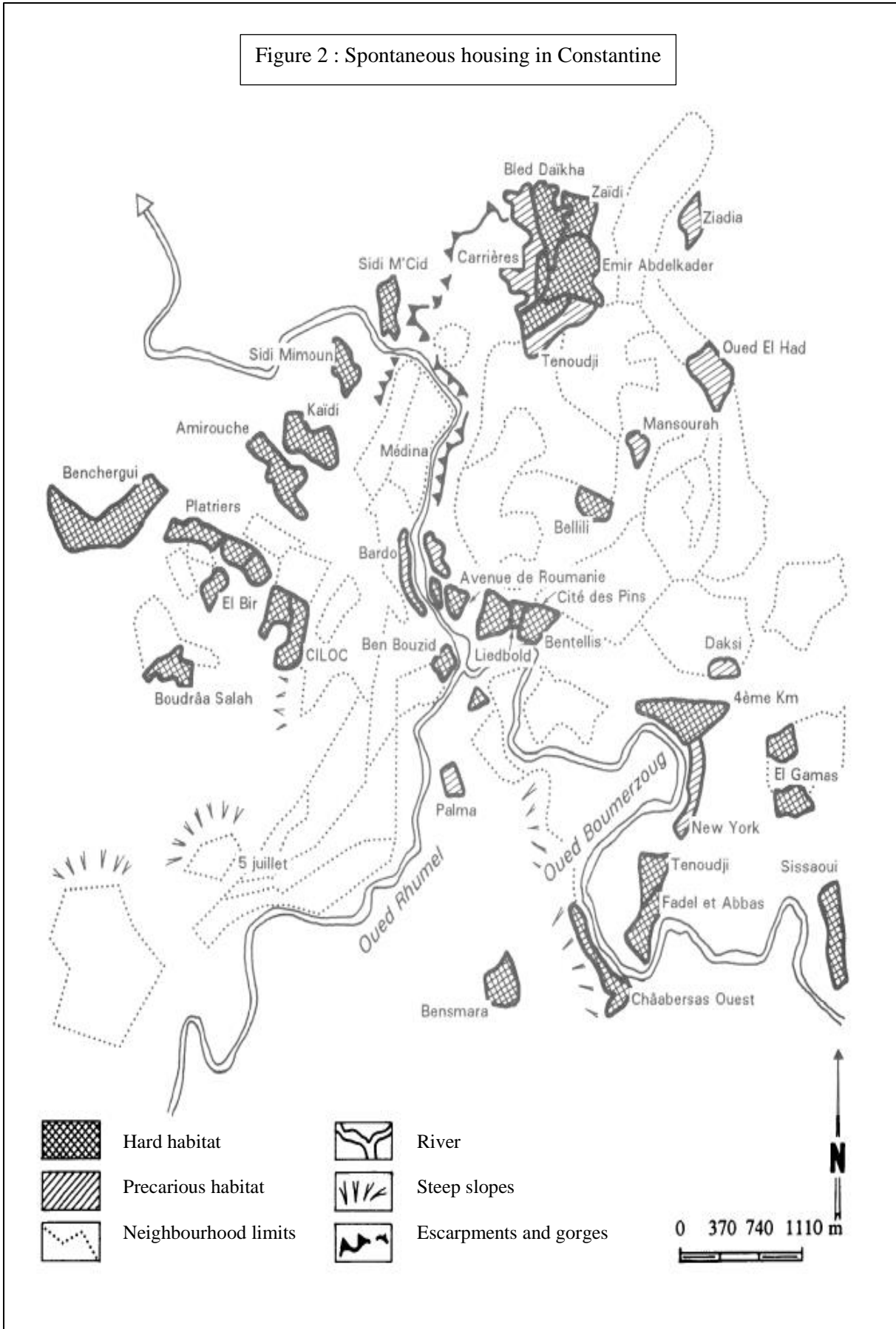
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<sup>3</sup>According to the Robert dictionary: Agglomeration of unhygienic shacks, made of metal sheets and recycled materials, where the most miserable population lives.

<sup>4</sup> Hollow blocks to build the walls

<sup>5</sup> Person who illegally occupies a vacant dwelling.

Figure 2 : Spontaneous housing in Constantine



Source: (Spontaneous housing in Algeria: the case of Constantine.) (Meskaldji Ghanima, 1994), page 85.



## **6- ZHUNs as a solution for the eradication of precarious housing**

The solution to shelter slum dwellers was the option for "decent housing" which took the form of mass housing, a process of serial reproduction resulting from functionalist ideology, where the city quickly became a place of bad living and deficiencies of all kinds (delinquency, lawlessness, drugs, insecurity, etc.). (Hammache Seddik, 2020).

Algeria opts for the form of ZHUN (New Urban Housing Zone) which have been able to embody the segregation and ephemeral efficiency of a stereotyped mass production.

The ZHUNs have been sustained only by the obsession of maximum housing (quantity) for the population in order to offer them a real urban environment. But everyone knows that large housing estates do not make the city. The problem is that in 2020 we are still using these disqualified solutions.

From the new city of Ahmed Zabana (Oran) to the city of Ali Mendjeli (Constantine), to the new city of Drah Errich (Annaba), from the new city of Sidi Abdallah to the city of Bouinen (Algiers), a "prototype" urbanism subject to the same model: tens of thousands of dwellings, towers and bars with raised colors, which have pseudo collective spaces of proximity (parking spaces, lawns, children's playground, swings, etc.) at the base of the buildings

The new cities around Algiers, Oran, Constantine (Figure 3) or Annaba are in reality only large peripheral complexes intended to reduce the housing deficit. We are far from the real city that remains to be built or remodeled. (Hammache Seddik, 2020)

Such an approach cannot create the public space, which represents the matrix of urbanism. Are we still condemned to resort to the archaic production logic of the last century? This process, strongly condemned, only creates a failure of the "city" where ordinary urban life is so expected. If the city of the past symbolized the ideal, our cities are terrifying, they symbolize insecurity and lack of integration.

Given the enormous public program to be implemented, it is true that this model seduces by its legitimate operability: price, repetitiveness and speed of implementation. The overestimated efficiency remains too anchored in the consciousness of the public contracting authority as the only strategic starting point for mass production. The urban morphology of Algerian cities suffers greatly from an excess of reproduction of the same conceptual form, hidden in several formulas for access to public housing (Hammache Seddik, 2020).

Figure 3: AADL housing in subscription in Mostaganem



Source: AADL housing in subscription in Mostaganem (Spontaneous housing in Algeria: the case of Constantine) (Meskaldji Ghanima, 1994)

The ZHUN procedure, created by ministerial circular of February 19, 1975, represents a response to a strong demand for housing. Heir to the French Priority Urbanization Zones (ZUP), it seems favorable to those in charge of the housing sector in a context where, as noted by (Jean-Yves, TOUSSAINT, 1993) "closer to 'Arabism' than to the spirit of traditional architecture and urbanism", which, as explained by (Ravéreau, A, 1981) "expresses the result of adaptation to environmental constraints".

The distribution of spaces in the accommodation structures is transferred in an almost identical way. Thus, in these new "real urban poles" are duplicated parts of the city, in the form of "duplicated cells", while the architectural design is reduced and ultimately focuses more on the aesthetic aspect, than on deeper design issues.

The housing built on the outskirts of Tipasa, for example, has reached nine floors in a city previously characterized by horizontality and where the seismic threat is proven.

This typology is now imposed as a kind of standard "The model of towers and bars", it is dominant and represents the way to produce the Algerian city.

## 7- Conclusion:

The transformations of family life and rapid demographic changes have fueled the proliferation of precarious housing, taking into consideration the aspirations of a middle class that had been abandoned in the 1990s, and in a tense political and regional context, the state has thus sought to ensure or strengthen social peace.

But the implementation of the new housing programs has been difficult. The selection of beneficiaries, in particular, posed many problems. The State has taken successive measures to prevent the development of fraudulent and speculative practices, both on the part of residents and other housing actors (local administration, developers, etc.). It is regrettable that the local authorities on the one hand, the inhabitants themselves on the other hand have been kept away from the realization and management of these new programs (Yousfi, B, 2016). In addition, the new housing programs of the 2000s have accelerated a process of peri-urbanization in particular in large Algerian cities (Trache S.M., 2010; Semmoud B., 2008). Given the costs and constraints of development in a context of shortage of building land, all housing programs have been inserted by juxtaposition on the same sites, which has given rise to a form of social mix, imposed by the imperatives of development more than by the local authorities.

The problems posed today in Algeria by housing and urban planning have similarities with those raised by the French model, where social housing is concentrated in the poorest municipalities and where, conversely, the richest municipalities continue to attract the most affluent social categories (Desponds D., 2006).

Several cases of Algerian cities show that high-standard promotional housing is now concentrated in the center and that the neighboring municipalities have seen their populations and their equipment needs grow without being provided with the corresponding financial and technical means.

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