

The Casbah: reimaging the Counter-Space

by

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A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of Graduate and

Postdoctoral Affairs in

partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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DEFINITIONS

Agency: "...the concept of agency can be understood to mark the socially determined capability to act and to make a difference. Agency has commonly been associated with notions of freedom, free will, action, creativity, originality and the possibility of change brought about through the actions of sovereign individuals...the language of agency celebrates the cultural power and capacities of persons, encourages us to act and to seek improvement of the human condition as well as persuading us to take responsibility for our actions."¹

Counter-Space: an antagonistic space that emerges, by virtue of its inhabitants' need of a medium for agency towards self-determination and autonomy.²

Détournement: "creates new and unexpected meanings by hijacking and disrupting the original."³

Interregnum: A breach of continuity; an interval, pause, vacant space.⁴

ABSTRACT

Inspired and motivated by the inherent character of agency in the spatial configuration of the Casbah of Algiers, the thesis presents an urban and architectural strategy in the form of a counter-space, aimed to extract agency from the youth of a generation that is still shell-shocked after growing up terrorized during the black decade of the Algerian Civil War.

Critical analysis of the Casbah through social, political, historical research, determined a site of action; the urban intervention is situated in an interstitial spatio-temporal context consisting—*spatially* - of Casbah's scaffolding and abandoned plots, - and *temporally*- within the present state of interregnum. A binary counter-space consisting of pathways and towers is developed within the spatiotemporal context.

A macro circulation path is established through existing scaffolding above the streets to create a new parallel network system within the Casbah. The system links a fragmented anthology of light temporary structures or towers which will

be constructed throughout the Casbah; each of which holds a program of cultural interest.

On a micro scale, the architectonics of the towers become an apparatus of *détournement*, by which the introverted form of the archetypal Casbah house is inverted. This aims to create a new architectural language of multifaceted, open, perforated structures that blur the line between inside and outside. It opens up the main spaces to the streets and use the negative space of a courtyard for access and circulation.

The temporary structures will reinject the youth into the heart of the city by physically situating them within and compelling them to confront their context. These structures will impose the youth upon the context; in turn, the context will impose itself upon the youth; with this confrontation between them, a contemporary counter-space is created and as a result the youth is presented with a platform for expression and action towards self-determination.

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1 PROLOGUE

Having been born and raised in Algiers of the 90's, I serve as the prototype the thesis tries to work through and for. I, the writer, through my explorations and postulations, am also an agent and this thesis becomes my gesture of agency. Throughout the conception of the thesis, I explore how architecture, as a multidimensional field, can be instrumentalized to challenge the status quo. Often wrongly assumed to be its limit of action, the physical realm of architecture is only a fragment of its character. As architects and urbanists, I believe that we not only comment on the current condition but have a moral obligation to act, through the medium of architecture, with the aspiration to perpetually ameliorate it.

Echoing Emmanuel Levinas on morality, Zygmunt Bauman says:

“...morality means being-for (not merely being-aside or ever being-with) the Other. To take a moral stance means to assume responsibility for the Other; to act on the assumption that the well-being of the Other is a precious

thing calling for my effort to preserve and enhance it, that whatever I do or do not do affects it, and that if I have not done it, it might not have been done at all, and that even if others do or can do it this does not cancel my responsibility for doing it myself... and this being-for is unconditional.”⁵

The project is not without an element of naiveté; the complexity of the context- political, social, historical, anthropological and religious- is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, this naiveté is embraced as it is in line with the outlook of this thesis to a hopeful future as it dwells within an interstitial state of interregnum, where the field of vision is short and the action rare.

2 NARRATIVE DIAGRAM

The thesis consists of three main sections:

Section 1– *Directed Research*– is a research narrative that familiarizes the reader with the context through a directed history of the Casbah. Additionally, it attempts to give an analytical background on the relevant formal and spatial characters of the Casbah. Visual and literary references are used- including some produced by the author- to guide through the narrative.

Section 2 – *Experimental Exercises*– This section consists of literature review that critically analyzes past projects as seen through a lenses directed at the Casbah. The theme of instrumentalization of architecture is studied in Bentham’s Panopticon and Lebbeus Woods’ Meta-institute. Moreover, a part dedicated to exploring Situationists Internationals’ Phychogeographical tactics of movement and subversive commentary are explored through exercises performed by the

author on contextual content such as maps and photographs.

Section 3– *Urban and Architectural Strategy*– compiles the explorations and learnings from Section 1 and 2 into a possible strategic urban intervention in the form of a counter-space within the Casbah.

The three sections, although laid out in a linear manner, are developed simultaneously and consist of intersecting layered paths between them which are dynamic and evolve as we travel through this thesis.

The Narrative Diagram illustrates this layered structure as series of Venn diagrams.

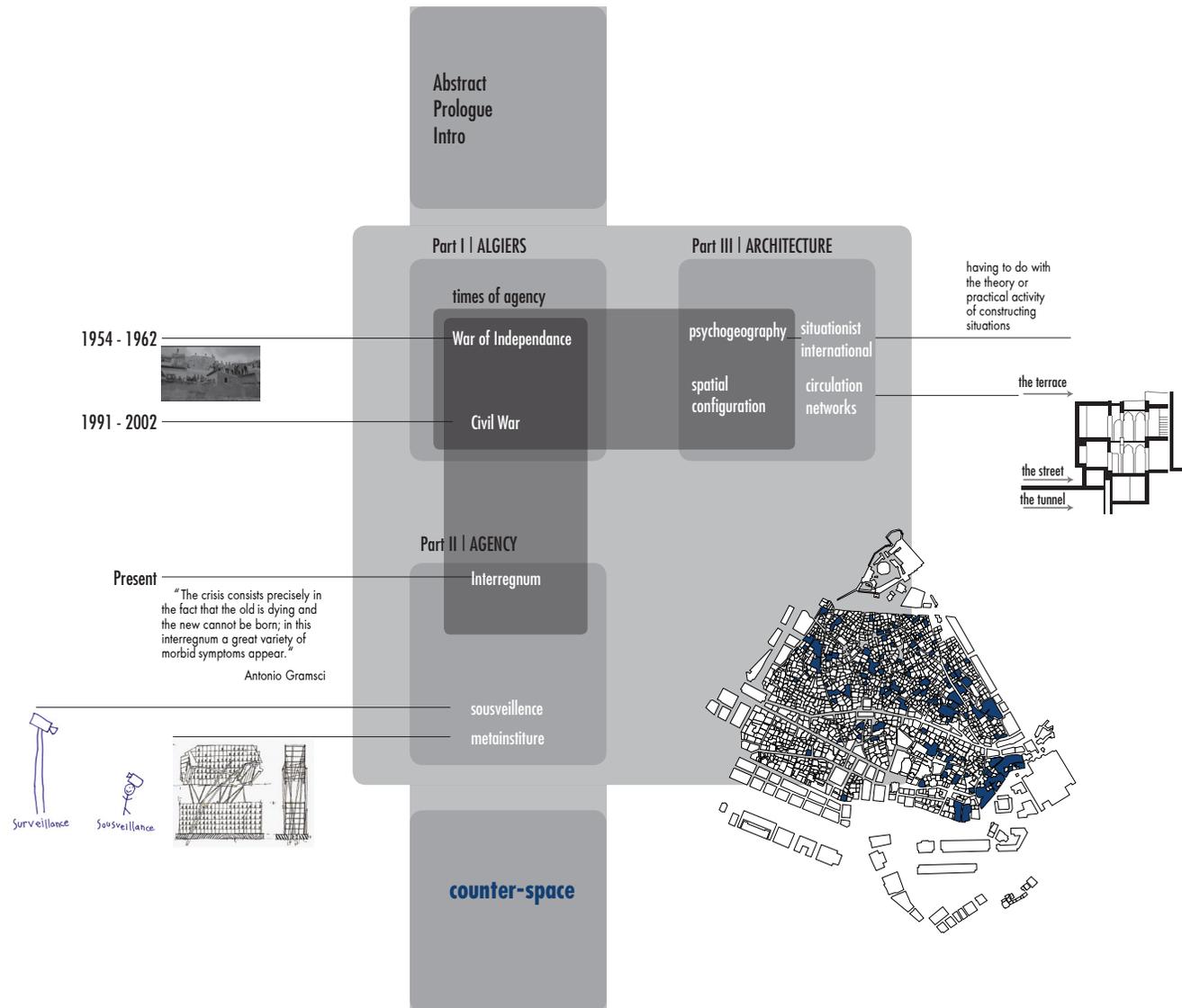


Figure 1



Figure 2

2.1 Directed Research

2.1.1 INTRODUCTION

Built on the ruins of the ancient Phoenician city of Icosim, the Casbah of Algiers sits on a site, whose strategic location on the coast of the Mediterranean, made it a coveted possession by a long succession of rulers. Following the Phoenicians of the 6th century B.C., the area was inhabited by a succession of Carthaginian, Berber, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab rulers.⁶ Algiers was run as a minor trading port by the Arabs from the 7th until the early 16th century. After a brief Spanish invasion, it was reclaimed by Turk corsair Khair-al-Din Barberousse who declared it the Capital of Algeria in 1516. Construction of the Casbah as we know it thus began and continued until the 17th century. The city's flourishing trade can be traced back to the lavish interiors of the Casbah's houses which were conceived as a combination of Ottoman and Arab Mediterranean architecture.⁷ The Casbah was originally completely surrounded and enclosed by a 3,100 meter fortified wall with watch towers. Access to the

city was established through 5 gates around it: Bab Azzoun, Bab al-Jadid, Bab al-Bahr, Bab Jazira and bab el-Oued.⁸ The most distinguishable character of the Casbah are its streets.

2.1.1.1 Circulation Networks

According to Zeynep Çelik, from an outsider's point of view, the Casbah's circulation networks makes no sense; however, for those who inhabit it and frequent its streets, the logic is clear. The three main types of streets found in the Casbah speak of the nature of their use. The first, is mostly found in the lower part of the old town, accommodates military, governmental and commercial activities, particularly the arterial streets that connect to the gates. These are arrayed with commercial spaces, cafés and bustling with activity from the early morning until before sundown. The second type of streets are those that traverse the Casbah to link the lower commercial district to the residential Haute Casbah. As one moves upward, the streets become stepped to accommodate to the steep topography and cut through the urban fabric to provide efficient communication. The last of the types are the narrow "ruelles" that dominate the circulation through the residential Haute Casbah. ⁹

The Casbah's circulation networks are not only complex in plan but in section as well. The steep topography on which the Casbah sits forms a cascade of houses. The resulting redundancy of superimposed and intersecting systems of circulation- underground tunnels, ground level streets and connected terraces- provided opportunities for subversive movement through the old quarters.

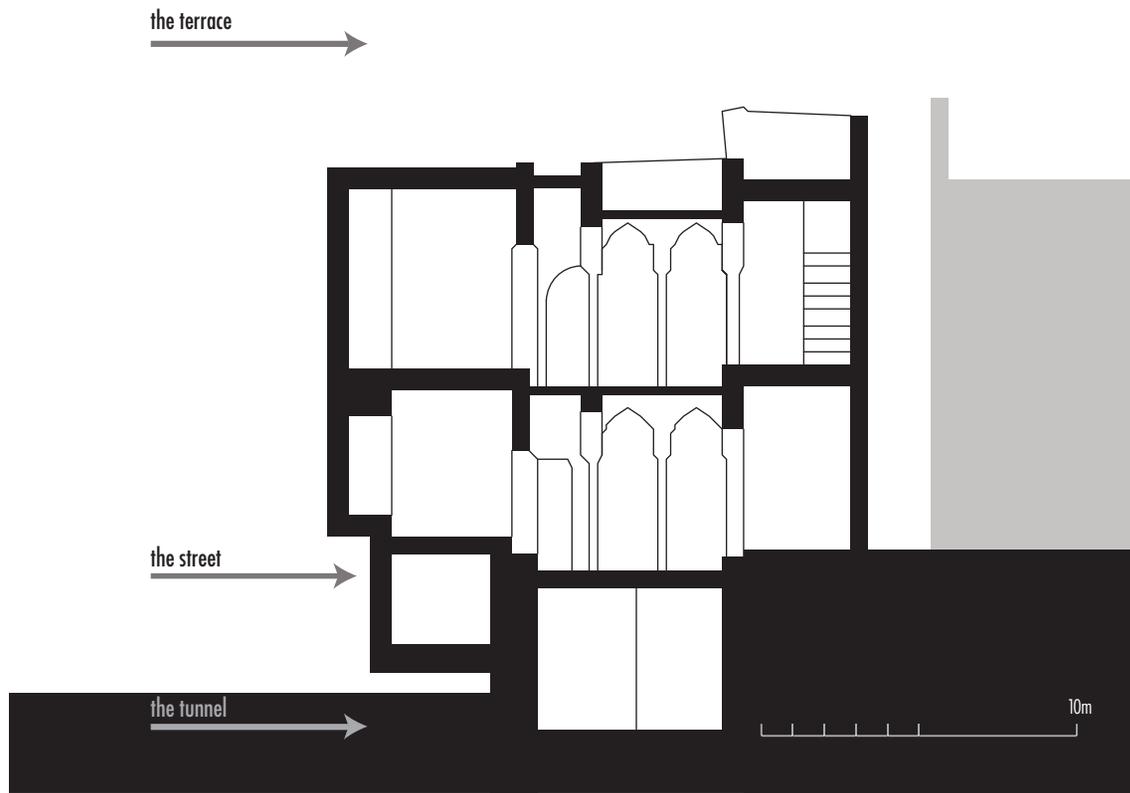


Figure 3
Section of Typical Casbah House

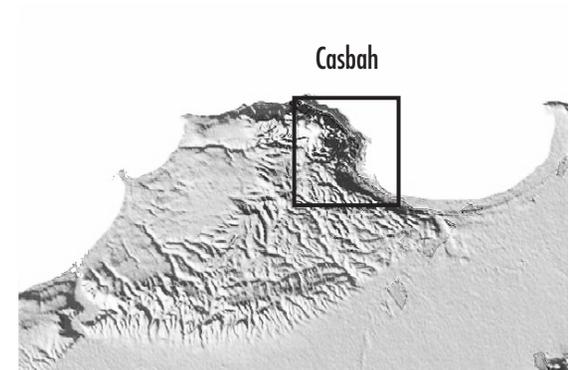


Figure 4
Steep Topography of Casbah

**2.1.1.2 Lesbet's Counter-space: A duality
between the Casbah and the
Marine Quarter**

As stated by Celik in her book *Colonial forms and Urban Interventions*, early French colonial interventions into the Casbah witnessed indiscriminate destruction of native Algerian religious and civic edifices to make way for a new colonial urbanism, centered around military movement and colonial dominance.¹⁰ Following the French revolution, emperor Napoleon III sought an ambitious project to “beautify” Paris. However, it can be noted that the interventions suggested by Baron Eugene Haussmann, the urban planner of Paris at the time, were linked to counter-



Figure 5

insurgency measures and troop movement through the city. His plan sought to carve out large boulevards through the fabric of old Paris.¹¹

The same troop-movement motivated urban intervention techniques, were applied to the Basse Casbah which was carved out in a Haussmannian fashion - to make way for wider boulevards and broad squares to accommodate movement and gathering of troops. Moreover, a new series of edifices were built in the area to become the new colonial face of the city.

When arriving from the North towards the Harbor of Algiers, the new facade is dominantly colonial with the Casbah peeking from behind. As highlighted by





Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of The Earth*,

“the “native” sector is not complementary to the European. The two confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity. Governed by a purely Aristotelian logic, they follow the dictates of mutual exclusion: There is no conciliation possible.”¹²

It is clear how the contrast between the two areas, which developed as a result of the colonial interventions, creates a separation between the space of the One and the space of the Other in an attempt to push forward the colonist propaganda.

The Haute Casbah was left to the Algerians, but done so purposefully without any infrastructural support or maintenance. This gave rise to an interesting phenomenon that Çelik references from Jaffae Lesbet- Algerian sociologist’s analysis in the book *La Casbah d’Alger* of the Casbah as a counter-space:

“The implicit menace of destruction to the casbah posed

by neglect played a constructive and catalyzing role on the residents and forced them to pool their resources to stop the “natural” demolition of their neighborhoods. The basis for an alternative urban administration was established, operating on two levels: the maintenance of public open spaces by designated officers from the casbah and the maintenance of individual houses by the collaborative and organized labor of renters and owners. The residents of the casbah thus spoke back to colonizers by turning to themselves, consolidating their unity, and establishing their own system. With this move, Lesbet maintains, the Casbah was transformed into a “counter space” (*espace contre*) that represented the oppositional voice of Algerians to colonial power.”¹³

The notion of the counter-space is a social phenomenon that arose from the need for the indigenous Algerian people of the Casbah to hold on to their identity and assert their existence in times of heavy colonial efforts to impose power over them.

In sociological terms, the use of the word “space” in Lesbet’s counter-space is metaphorical signifying an act of defiance and antagonism, however, because the identity of the people is intertwined with the Casbah itself, the counter-space in this case has a literal spatial element represented by the Casbah. The Casbah thus becomes an antagonistic instrument to counter the colonial space established in the Marine Quarter.

The Casbah, as a counter-space, is most active again during the Algerian War of Independence making it the ideal place for the Front de Liberation National (FLN) to center the heart of their struggle. In *Symbolism and Memory in Architecture: Algerian Anti-colonial Resistance and the Algiers Casbah*, Kahina Djar notes the three main advantages of the Casbah:

“the recruitment potential; the urban characteristics of the medina district and the architectural configuration of its houses and the powerful cultural symbolic meaning of the Casbah.”¹⁴

Beyond its distinct configuration, the Casbah provided its inhabitants with a strong attachment to their identity through the space. As a result, inhabitant and space became intertwined and formed the counter-space.

2.1.2 Times of Agency

Times of Agency are those when people, with their backs against the wall, militarize the architecture to regain spatial control.

This is a historical inquiry into critical moments in the recent events that took place in the Casbah. The two periods- War of Independence and Algerian Civil War- were chosen by virtue of how present they are in the minds of the Algerian people. The generation of youth targeted in the thesis is the last one to, not only, have direct contact with former revolutionaries from the War of Independence and whose parents were born in colonized Algeria, but who also grew up during the Algerian Civil War. This is the last generation that will tie these critical times together.

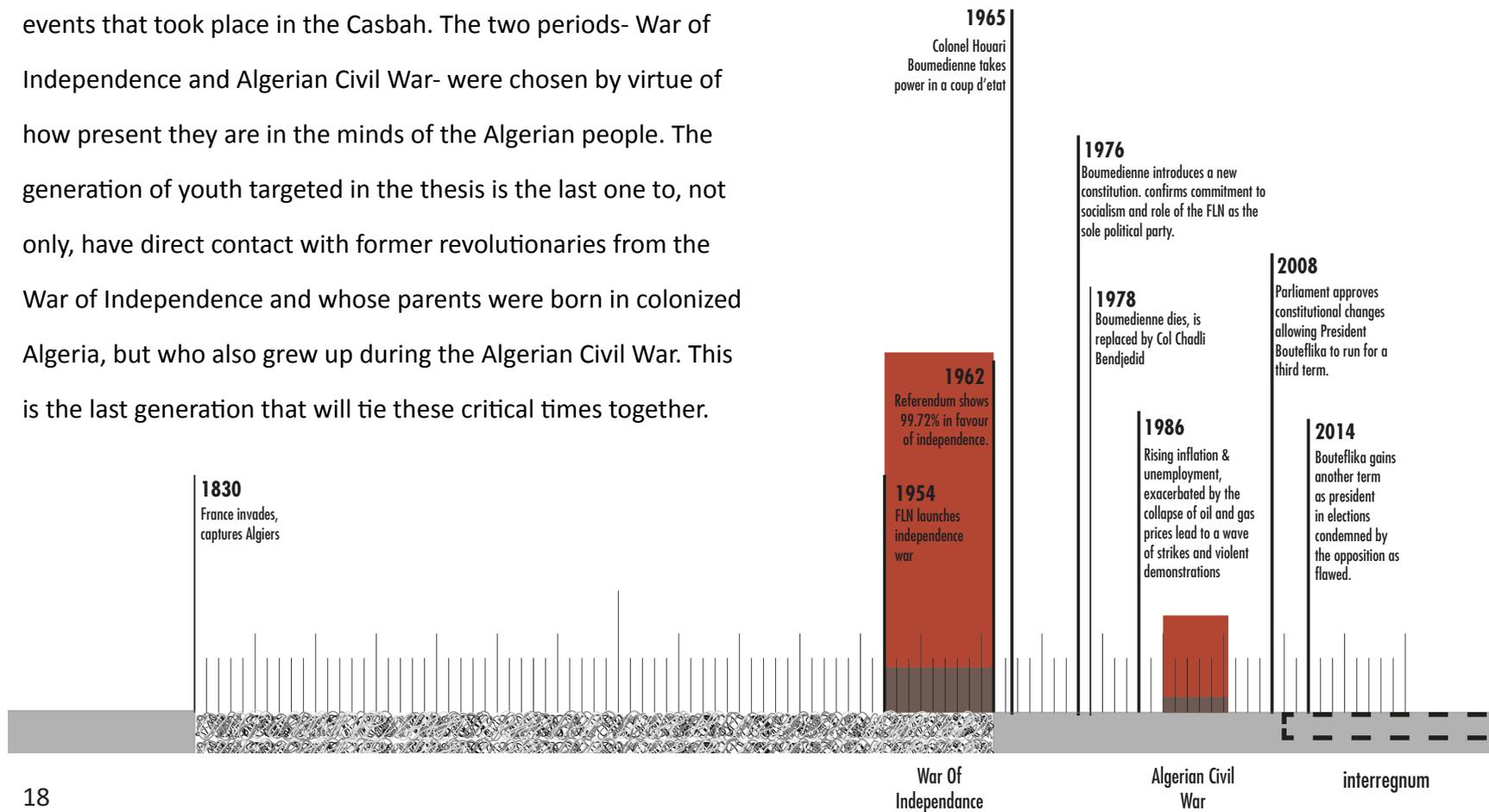


Figure 8

Throughout the 20th century, the Casbah has been a place of great movement and violence. From the infamous eight year Battle of Algiers to the “Decennie Noire” Algerian Civil War of the 90s, irrespective of political agendas, the Casbah has seen the birth of many alternative movements that took advantage of its spatial configuration to plan and mobilize against the central powers of their time.

2.1.2.1 Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962)

During the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), the architecture of the Casbah was seen as instrumental to the revolutionaries in circumventing the panoptic eye of the colonizer, therefore allowing the urban guerrilla movement and mobilization militants of the Front de Libération Nationale.

A native of the Casbah and the head of the militant faction of the FLN, Yacef Saadi, in his biography remembers the role the Casbah’s architecture played in the struggle for independence. He does so with an almost humane way when talking about

the Casbah, talking of it as if of a fellow militant with whom he fought side by side and whose intelligence was instrumental in implementing guerrilla tactics.

“[...] located in a corner of the city, dominating the Sea and playing an active part in the European urban centre, with its inextricable maze of alleyways, the Casbah is a vast labyrinth on which are overlaid thousands of accesses and unexpected gateways [...] With its circular



Figure 9

and ascendant urban configuration, with its dead-ends, its anonymous and furtive doors, its inclined and intertwined walls – in short, with all its outlaw architectural features – the Casbah is almost predestined to struggle and ‘rebellion’.”¹⁵

It is possible to see how, by reversing the power structure, the architecture became an instrument of “sousveillance” (counter-surveillance). It took the leverage from the French troops - by forcing them to venture deep into the unfamiliar, tortuous streets of the Casbah - and giving it back to the natives who understood the logic behind these maze-like passages. The notion of familiarity or belonging in terms of understanding of a logic that is not straight forward, is the main driving force for the counter-space; the more time you spend in it, the more you belong to it and the better you understand its logic.

In January 1957, after a series of attacks performed by the FLN on colonial settlers, the French government responded

by sending brutal General Jacques Massu to subdue the revolutionaries. He makes the same observations about the disposition of the Casbah’s architectural configuration to “rebellion”, however, he does so with a foreboding tone:

“[...] the streets form an inextricable labyrinth for anyone who does not know well the secret [of the Casbah]. In each step, we climb a few degrees, steps taken apart so obliquely that one needs a torch even by day to see where to walk. Most of the streets give onto a dead-end. Quite often, where daylight does not even penetrate, even the streets become comparable to dark tunnels, except in their two extremities. [...] In between these pathways, the houses communicate through deep winding corridors, unexpected recesses, and tricky walls. There is no need to go out in order to tread one’s way between quarters.”¹⁶ Jacques Massu

The Algerian War of Independence ended in July 1962 with the

signing of the Evian Accords. The French left behind a scorched country and up to 1.5 million Algerians dead. Following was an exodus of French colonizers and their Algerian supporters to France, who took with them the administrative and technological knowhow.

2.1.2.2 The Algerian Civil War (1991-2002)

Algeria would bloom during the 1970's under the leadership of Houari Boumediene, who pushed for large agricultural reforms, industrialization and nationalized the oil industry. Under his tenure, Algeria experienced a decade of strong growth guided by the government's socialist platform which was fueled by high commodity prices in the hydrocarbons sector. After Boumediene's death in 1978, the country's economy slowly declined as the socialist programs became unsustainable. The state of economic crisis only worsened with the crash of the oil price in the early 80's. As a result, unemployment soared and the population's anger towards the government grew. In the late 1980's, the government decided to abandon their socialist

platform and embark in a privatization scheme to reactivate the economy. However, the result was the opposite as the economy further declined and civil unrest erupted into fierce protests in the late 1980's.¹⁷

In the Algerian Civil War (91-02), again, the Casbah saw the rise of the Islamist movements from and through its urban architecture and was indeed a problematic area for the Algerian military to control. In 1992, after the political party Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of elections, the Algerian Military canceled the next round of elections in fear FIS's growing popularity. From then on, the country plunged into a bloody civil war that saw over 200,000 people gruesomely killed and another 7000 disappeared.¹⁸ In conflict, many people fled the countryside, which was a main target for terrorist groups at the time, to seek refuge in the capital Algiers. The Casbah, a relatively cheap place to live, saw an influx of squatters and became highly overpopulated. The exodus from the countryside towards the Casbah put excessive pressure on both structure and

infrastructure and consequently accelerated its deterioration. Moreover, during this time of political and civil unrest, cultural aspirations were put on the back burner, and rehabilitation plans were abandoned.

One of the most dangerous consequences of the civil war was the loss of intellect. This ensued from tactics of “intellectual cleansing” adopted by the Islamist fundamentalists; any person deemed too secular in his/her discourses or scholarly endeavors was harshly persecuted. The severe intellectual loss, by way of assassination and terror, led to mass migration. In a 2004 report published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the conservative official number of university-qualified Algerians forced into exile by the civil war was 214,000.

In 2001, FLN candidate and current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, took office and was able to bring relative peace through a series of controversial negotiations, concessions

and pardons centered on culpability during the civil war. As the country slowly stepped out of the civil war, in an attempt to rebuild all that was destroyed, the discourse and plans to conserve, preserve and rehabilitate the Casbah resumed.

Unfortunately, little has been done since beyond putting up structural bracing and scaffolding around houses that are in a state of near collapse and therefore in extreme need of structural support.

2.1.2.3 The Interregnum

A decade and a half after the end of the civil war, the losses suffered during the 90s still resonate deeply in the collective memory of Algerians, and have resulted in a lack of social, political and cultural agency. With a loss of some of the brightest thinkers in the country, the youth grew up in a culture of submissiveness that encouraged, as a survival skill, inhabiting the periphery of society. Gramsci states that “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be

born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”¹⁹

The atrocities left the generation that grew up during the Civil war in a state of terror and shock; a generation of youth that is timid, demotivated and extremely paranoid. Crippled by their lack of agency and the absence of support for critical thought, prospects for any progress for the future are fragile.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, a state of interregnum is that in which “the old way of doing things does not work anymore but a new way of doing things has not been created yet.”²⁰ It is indeed the state of Algeria and the state of its youth. The crisis is in the fact that the youth do not or cannot conceive of a different condition of being, as Sartre explains in his book *Being and Nothingness*:

“In so far as man is immersed in the historical situation, he does not even succeed in conceiving of the failures and lacks in a political organization or determined

economy; this is not, as is stupidly said, because he “is accustomed to it,” but because he apprehends it in its plenitude of being and because he can not even imagine that he can exist in it otherwise.”²¹

This thesis project will now explore how it is situated in the interstitial time gap of the interregnum, will address its present state, take control and respond with an urban strategy that sets out to pull the youth from the margins of society and repositions them in the heart of the decision making, pending decisions of “decisions makers”.

2.2 Experimental Exercises

This section analyzes some interesting past projects such as Bentham's Panopticon- a case study in the instrumentalization of architecture; Woods' Meta-institute – A space for an introspective Havana- and the Situationists International's tactics for the construction of situations.

2.2.1 The Instrumentalization of Architecture: The Panopticon²²

Since there is a strong aspiration to work through the instrumentalization of the Casbah's architecture, it is important to look at one of the most emblematic examples of such methods and understand how it was used to exercise control.

This is important when we analyze it through the lens, the conception and evolution, of the Panopticon, and the antagonistic architecture of the Casbah that opposes it.

The term "Panopticon" was first coined by the 18th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in his studies of

penitentiary design. Bentham was a strong proponent of law reform, which came from the influence of Enlightenment on his work. The Age of Enlightenment, also often referred to as "The Age of Reason", is a 17th century movement that was born out of French salons which challenged the brute dogmatic order of the time and reoriented thought towards reason. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, French Philosopher Michel Foucault summarizes well the intent behind Bentham's Panopticon, "Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable."²³ Bentham seeks to induce "discipline" which is, as defined by Foucault in *Panopticism*:

"A type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a "physics" or an "anatomy" of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by "specialized" institutions [...], or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end [...],

or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power [...]; or by apparatuses that have made discipline their principle of internal functioning [...], or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole”²⁴

The Panopticon is a state which an individual is put under possible but unconfirmed surveillance. It aims to be a deliberate and explicit gesture to let the person being observed know that they might be under scrutiny, which then leads to self-surveillance and “discipline” or, as Mann echoing Foucault says, “the knowledge that they may be under surveillance may be sufficient to induce obedience to authority.”²⁵ Bentham’s design for a prison is an architectural expression of the Panopticon concept. It is a building that occupies the circumference of a circle, which harbors inmates in individual cells exposed to the inner courtyard. The cells are built across the building radially

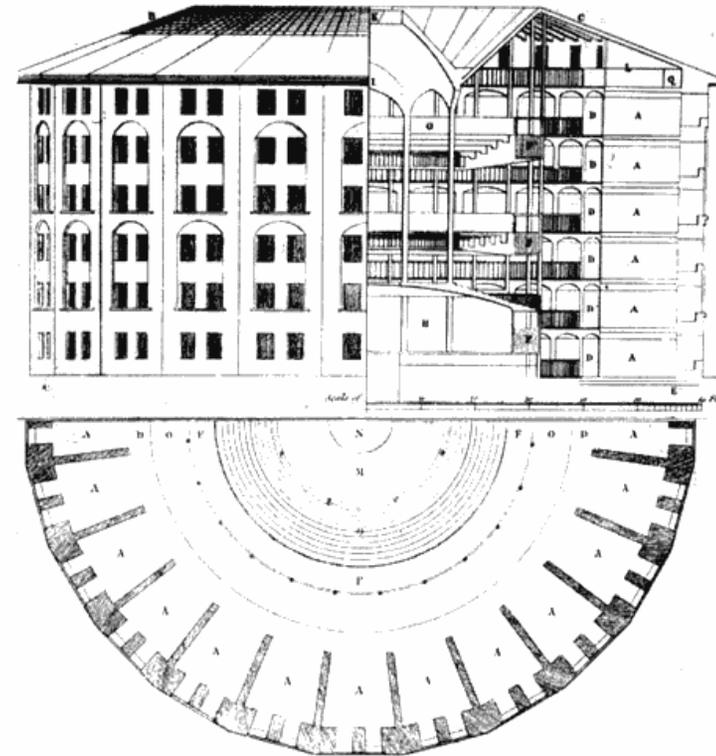


Figure 10

and have a second window in the back which overlooks to the outside letting light in and consequently increases the visibility of the inmates within each cell. The center of the circle is occupied by a watchtower, from which the guards supervise the prisoners. They are always visible, however, the guard is concealed within the tower:

“Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action”²⁶

A key element in Bentham’s attempt to optimize and increase the efficiency of surveillance is the instrumentalization of architecture. According to Foucault “that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation

of which they are themselves the bearers.”²⁷

In the essay *Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo*, from Michel de Certeau’s *Heterologies*, writing on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* explains how “ the new techniques are refined and applied without recourse to any overt ideology: the development of a cellular grid transforms space itself into an instrument that can be used to discipline, to program, and to keep under observation any social group” (Certeau, 1986) Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, rather than examining the institutions of power, focuses on the mechanisms and the “silent technologies” deployed to impose “discipline” on the masses, of which the rethinking and mechanization of architecture to serve that purpose is fundamental.

Reconnecting this to the Casbah, there are two main reasons why the Casbah has always been a problematic area to control and discipline. Firstly, due to the configuration of its mazelike streets. This renders moot the power of the panoptic apparatus,

which depends primarily on a clear and transparent “all-seeing” field of vision. The narrow shaded maze of streets, which at times arrive at dead ends, inhibits the “transparency” that the Panopticon needs to function. Secondly, the Casbah lends to its inhabitants-by means of dense urban fabric and access to the terraces-a parallel space above the street to practice sousveillance. As illustrated in *Figure 11* through a still from Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 *The Battle of Algiers*²⁸.



Figure 11

“Sousveillance” is a term first coined by wearable computing pioneer Steve Mann to describe inverse surveillance. It originates from the French words “sous” (from below) and “viller” (to watch): to watch from below. Portable recording devices have given the general public the capability to perform sousveillance acts; to surveil as opposed to be surveilled. A citizen taking a mobile phone video in order to show evidence of a crime is an example of Sousveillance. Mann calls the systems of Sousveillance



Figure 12

and Surveillance self-balancing, pointing out that societies may employ it “as a way to balance the increasing (and increasingly one-sided) surveillance.

Sousveillance, a reversal of power and the panoptic eye as a concept came much later than Bentham and Foucault’s preoccupations. However, its essence has been present wherever there was a type of power shift from the surveiller to the surveilled as clearly seen in the Casbah, where the highest points are the terraces, accessed exclusively by those who live in it. The inhabitants of the Casbah have an advantageous physical status where they are able to see- from this vantage point- movement through their streets. From the safety of their terraces, they are able to keep watch over their streets. This reversal of power, offered by the Casbah’s configuration offers to its inhabitants was instrumentalized to fight against the intruders of the French Army. The acquisition of a vantage point above the street will be explored in the conception of the urban strategy as a mechanism to give the youth power over their context.

2.2.2 Meta-institute

A pertinent and interesting programmatic case study is Lebbeus Woods's Meta-institute for Havana; an institution about institutions; one that studies, questions and holds institutions responsible for their duties. The programmatic ambition of the Meta-institute project has the capacity to address and respond to the state of interregnum in that it takes a step back from *what* to *how* content is generated by institutions (social, political cultural).

“Because of its vibrant culture and volatile political history, Havana is an ideal site for the establishment of an institute for the study of the idea and practice of institutions. The aim of such a meta-institute is to devise principles, practices and rules by which institutions (social, political, cultural) can revise and reform themselves. The meta-institute proposed for Havana (explored in three variations) is devoted to the analysis

and invention of both stable and fluid urban terrains, the ambiguous, paradoxical, and unpredictable landscapes of the contemporary city that embody forces of change.”²⁹

(January 1995) Lebbeus Woods

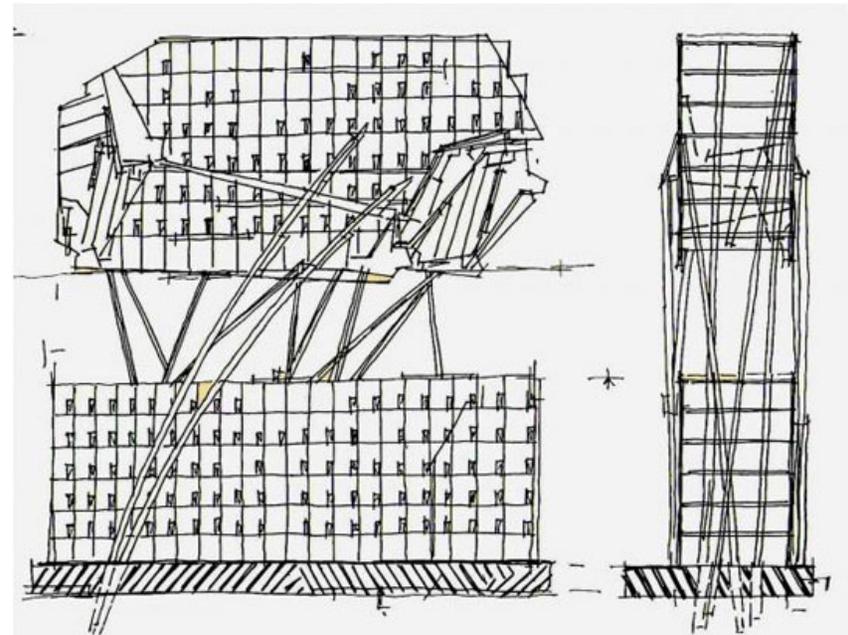


Figure 13

2.2.3 Situationists | Psychogeography

Throughout the thesis exploration, the works and theories of the Situationists Internationals are explored and some of their exercises in re-experiencing the city are referenced in attempts to discover the Casbah's experiential character.

The Situationist International (1957-1972) is an artistic movement formed by influential thinkers and artists such as Guy Debord and Asger Jørgensen. The SI developed by the absorption of predecessor avant-guard groups as the Letterist International and Imaginary Bauhaus, with ancestry that traces back to the international surrealist movement.³⁰ Derived from Sartre's concept of "situation" in *Being and Nothingness*, a Situationist is defined as "relating to the theory or practical activity of constructing situations. One who engages in the construction of situations."³¹

Before delving into SI tactics, it is important to highlight that this thesis does not concern itself with "revolution" but with

the advancement of agency through the instrumentalization of architecture to create situations or event spaces for a socio-cultural renaissance of the youth in times of interregnum. Although radical and political in their assertions- including those made in support of the Algerian cause during its period of decolonization- the SI diverged from contemporary revolutionary movements in that they did not call for the overthrowing of the state or the economy, but rather advocated for "a revolution in everyday life"³²

One of the main tactics that the SI used is *psychogeography*, which as explained by Debord, "sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."³³ Psychogeography, the methodology most used by the SI to inspire new and surprising ways of perceiving one's milieu, utilizes two main techniques: *dérive* and *détournement*.

As part of the acquaintance with and rediscovery of the Casbah, exercises in *dérive* and *détournement* were performed by the author.

2.2.4 *Dérive*: exercise #1 in psychogeography

Dérive, as defined by SI, is “a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. Also used to designate a specific period of continuous deriving.”³⁴ *Dérive* usually involves an experiential mode of walking that is devoid of a person’s usual motives for the action- such as walking for the purpose of work or leisure.³⁵ Instead, in *dérive*, a person allows the context to guide his/her movement.

A modest exercise in *dérive* is attempted from a bird’s eye view of the Casbah as *Figure 14* displays. Maps of the Casbah were layered and then the access doors to the old walled city were located on the map. Taking each of the five doors of the Casbah as starting/ending points of the journey, paths are drawn



Figure 14

through the maze-like streets of the Casbah to arrive from one door to another. Layered over each other, the paths create an abstracted parallel network of multiplicitous paths. This exercise will be used later in devising a strategy of circulation within the counter-space.

2.2.5 Détournement

The second of the tactics used in psychogeography, is *détournement*; from the French word “détourner” meaning “to change something’s orientation or its primary objective.”³⁶ It is the tactic by which existing art is manipulated by adding, subtracting or rearranging its elements to create a new ensemble that firstly, negates the meanings of the elements attached to the original work, and secondly, appropriates new meaning to the détourned elements associated with their new ensemble. Furthermore, the capacity to attach new meaning to a détourned element enriches it beyond the original because of the double association of the old and the new meanings.³⁷

Détournement is essentially used to demonstrate “how an avant-garde artistic practice can be turned to political ends, providing a simple tool that subverts one’s opponent’s message while promoting one’s own.”³⁸ In an effort to explore this subversive way of commentary, a visual attempt at the practice is performed.

2.2.5.1 Photo-manipulation exercise in Détournement³⁹

The original photographs (Figure 15 a, b, c) on which the *détournement* is performed were taken during the celebrations in 1962 of the independence of Algeria by French photographer Marc Riboud. The youth’s involvement was critical in the war and their presence was overwhelming.



Figure 15 a, b, c

“UN SEUL HERO LE PEUPLE?”

Figure 15 shows a photograph taken on one of the streets of the Casbah; on the wall is transcribed the phrase “un seul hero, le peuple” which translates to: “one hero, the people”. This is the slogan that the FLN used in its campaign to gain the support of the native Algerians in its anti-colonial efforts during the years 1954-1962. Implied here is the centering of the Algerians in the resistance, telling them that the success of the struggle lies in their hands. Their action and support is to be seen as an act of heroic nature that will save them and their country from the repressive clutch of the colonizer. The same political party has ruled this “democratic republic” since the independence in 1962. *Détournement* in the form of a series of photographic manipulations on the original, such as adding a question mark to the end of the slogan and erasing parts of the inhabitant, speaks to the doubt, absence and lack of agency of the people of the Casbah. Moreover, situating the image and naming them “*Figure 16*” reintroduces it as a fragment of this thesis, thereby offering

a new meaning relative to their new context. Inserting this image into the thesis and using the slogan in a chapter subtitle is an exercise in *détournement* which is a modern technique of ironic commentary on certain conditions. As mentioned in the Prologue, the thesis is a gesture of agency, the artistic exercises of *détournement* performed by the author are ironic commentary on the interregnum and the lack of action of the political leaders.

Figure 17 and *Figure 18* follow the same tactic of *détournement* and comment on the absence of today’s youth from an Algeria that was liberated by its youth.



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

2.3 Urban and Architectural Strategy

2.3.1 Urban Strategy

Interventions done on the Casbah left a physical mark on it. Another intervention on the Casbah is in line with the development of the Casbah's narrative.

2.3.1.1 Mosaic Maps

The Casbah has been morphing, changing and readapting throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and thus has become a mosaic that tells a dynamic story of the town. To build upon this mosaic with the story of the new generation would be to enrich the area with yet another layer. Both its inhabitants and the times it has gone through has left marks on the Casbah of Algiers. Be it Ottoman houses built to compliment Islamic lifestyle, to the colonial edifices that sought to exude power over the indigenous architecture, to the new wave of squatters who escaped unsafe rural villages to inhabit it. As is evident in the research, the Casbah's ever shifting and ever changing fabric has always been an honest storyteller of the contemporary condition. How can we set up a project to enrich the mosaic of the Casbah albeit temporarily, with the story of the new generation?

Figure 19 illustrates the Casbah's housing mosaic maps.

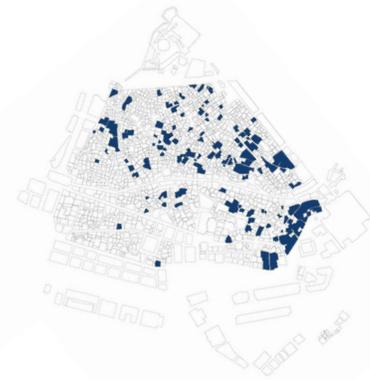
1. Houses from the Ottoman period once amounted to

almost 2000 dwellings; however, post-colonization merely 600 are left standing today. These still maintain their original form and are concentrated in the upper section known as the Haute Casbah.

2. Ottoman period with Colonial interventions: shows the ottoman houses that underwent colonial modifications.
3. Colonial Edifices Casbah/ Marine quarter: The buildings that were built during the French colonization, this clearly illustrates the colonial facade to the city that came to replace the Ottoman style of the lower Basse Casbah becoming the Marie Quarter.
4. Empty plots (POINTS OF INTERVENTION): the plots of land within the Casbah that are either empty or contained houses that fell to ruin. These empty plots are distributed all over the Casbah and start to inform of possible points of intervention.



1. Houses from the Ottoman period
2. Ottoman period with Colonial interventions
3. Colonial Edifices Casbah/ Marine quarter
4. Empty plots (POINTS OF INTERVENTION)



2.3.1.2 Spatiotemporal Context

The thesis postulation is spatiotemporal, that is, the context - out of which the project is born and into which it is situated- is four -dimensional as it is both site and time specific. The project has been specifically designed to inhabit the interstitial spaces – scaffolding and empty plots- within the Casbah during a time of interregnum. The dimension of time is fluid as it is relative to the state of interregnum; which does not have a fixed limit but is dependent on factors that are challenging to quantify, such as social dynamics, politics and economics.

2.3.1.3 Scaffolding

The scaffolding is a physical manifestation of an interstitial spatiotemporal architecture. It implies a space and time of active transition. By its inherent nature, scaffolding is temporary in form, material and assembly process. Typically, light steel members serve as structural support while platforms and stairs function as sites of movement and assembly; thus it serves both

a structural support system and a space for action and creation. Its presence in a context signifies progress and activity.

As previously stated, wars, neglect and increasing over population are some of the reasons that put the houses in the Casbah in major danger of collapse. Moreover, the way these houses are built, it is common for a cluster of houses to be structurally dependent on one another. Therefore, when one house collapses, there is a danger that other houses around it will follow. Ad hoc emergency structural bracing and scaffolding were placed around the houses deemed in the most danger of collapse, however, it is not nearly enough. The first intervention within the project is the immediate development of a scaffolding system to safe-guard more houses. This network will then double as a ground for the development of a circulation system consisting of pathways that are built into it.



Figure 19



Figure 20

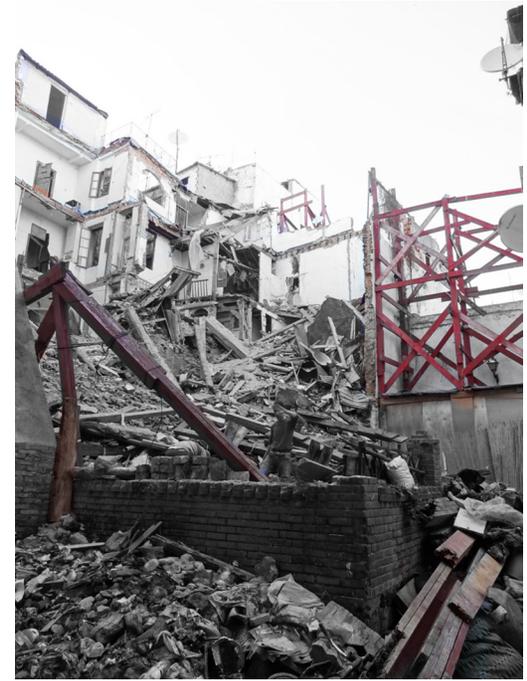


Figure 21



2.3.2 Architectural: The Counter-Space

Counter-Space- as defined by the author from an understanding of the general description of Jaffaer Lesbet’s analysis of the Casbah as an “espace contre” in his book *La Casbah d’Alger*- is antagonistic space that emerges, by virtue of its inhabitants’ need of a medium for agency towards self-determination and autonomy.⁴⁰ After establishing the sites of action- both special and temporal- the urban strategy is presented in the form of a counter-space- that is a space for the youth to inhabit, take ownership of and act within. The Counter-Space exists as a two-element synergy – towers and pathways.

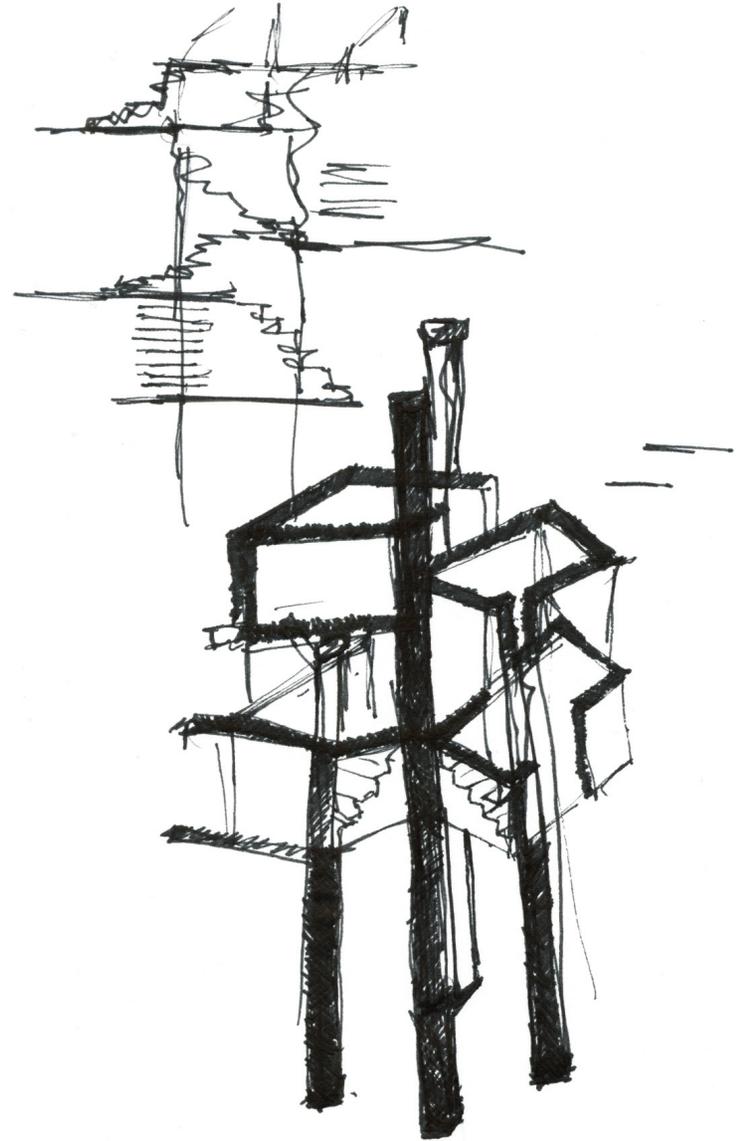


Figure 23

The conception of both architectural interventions is deeply embedded within and is a direct response to context. However, they represent two different approaches. In *Event Cities 3*, Bernard Tschumi lays out an interesting analytical juxtaposition of context and concept and explores three types of relationships that the two can have with each other- indifference, *reciprocity* and *conflict*. Interestingly, these respectively correspond to biologists' classification method of relationships between living organisms – commensalism, mutualism and parasitism.

Tschumi divides the possible interactions between concept and context into 3 categories:

1. *Indifference* whereby the two coexist but do not acknowledge or interact with one another
2. *Reciprocity* where the two complement each other to result in a combined effect greater than the sum of its parts
3. *Conflict* whereby the two are strategically pinned against

each other to induce tension and demand opposing interaction.⁴¹

Out of these three types of concept/context relationships, the urban strategy devised uses two active relationships; *reciprocity* of the paths with the streets of the Casbah and *conflict* of the towers with the surrounding houses; unlike the *indifference* which is passive relationship.

The new circulation network complements the Casbah's as it takes the configuration of its streets and reinforces the character of subversion and agency within the paths through redundancy. They float above the streets and compliment them as an alternative route for the youth. The towers on the other hand, confront their context, as they are in direct conflict with the surrounding physical space in their placement, and architectonics.



2.3.2.1 Pathways

The circulation network of pathways is built within the extensive system of scaffolding throughout the Casbah. It will consist of a web like structure of multiple intersecting pathways that create a maze analogous or - in Tschumi terms- reciprocal with configuration of the original streets below.

Access to the parallel existing circulation web will comprise of small staircases scattered throughout the streets. The staircases will be situated in no particular order or hierarchy, but rather at random within the maze-like urban fabric of the Casbah. Intersecting pathways and multiple access points present the youth that will inhabit the counter-space with an infinite number of possible paths; an autonomy that demands active decision making about how to navigate through the space. This, moreover, is in line with the subversive character of the redundant and intricate circulation of the Casbah.

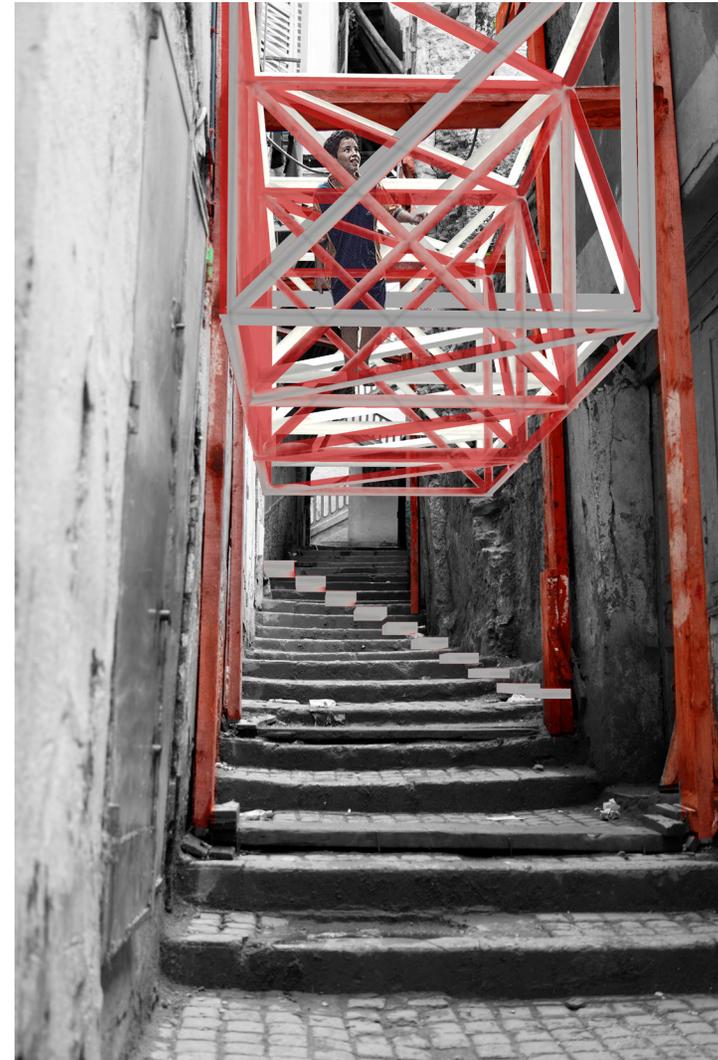
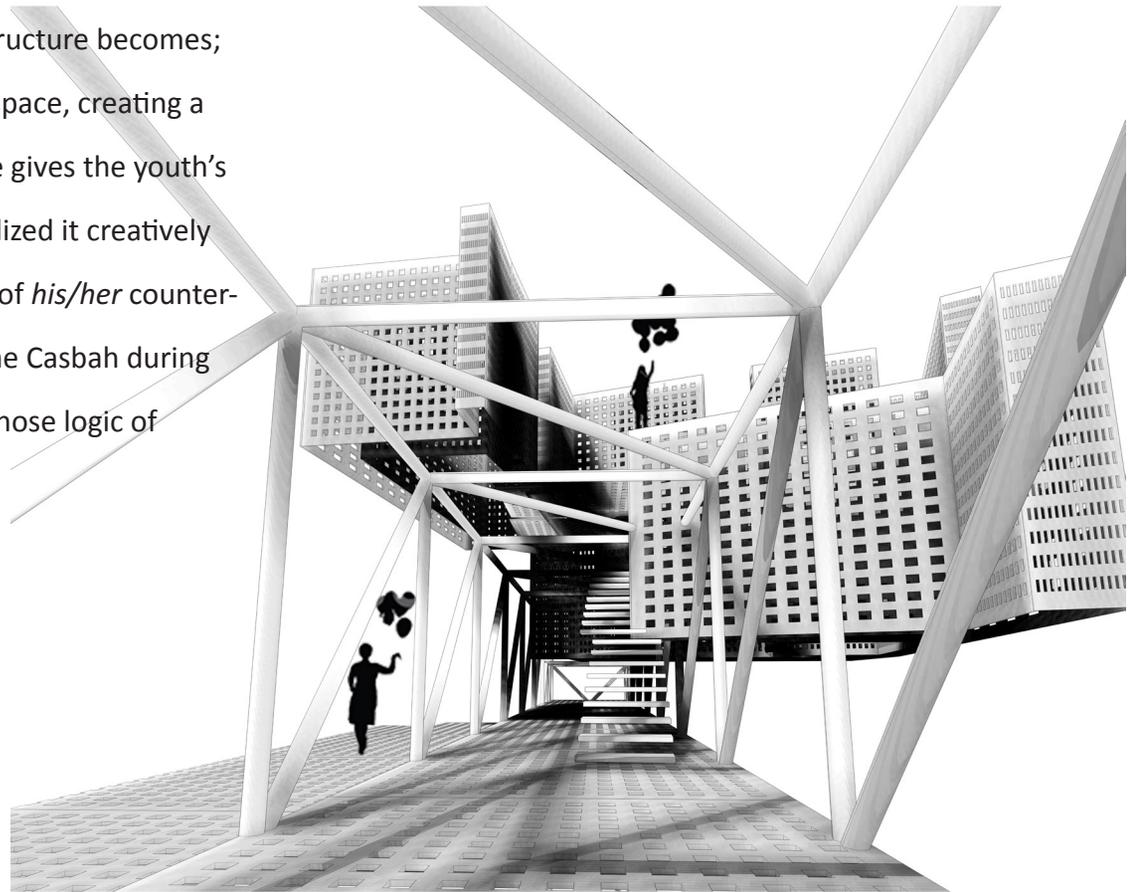


Figure 25

Just like French army soldiers felt venturing into the Casbah's complex streets, for the first time user of the counter-space, the arbitrary, movement through the paths creates a sense of alienation and of unfamiliarity. However, the more time spent in the counter-space, the more familiar the structure becomes; being familiar with a space, belonging to the space, creating a logic based on dwelling in and using the space gives the youth's confidence in his/her capacity to instrumentalized it creatively and actively. As a result they take ownership of *his/her* counter-space; as was the case of the inhabitants of the Casbah during both previously mentioned armed conflicts whose logic of passage was clear and familiar to them.



2.3.2.2 Towers

The second element of the counter-space consists of a fragmented anthology of programmed towers scattered throughout the Casbah. The decentralization and fragmentation of the program by ways of its spreading around the area is an essential complementary device to the network of paths' subversion strategy through multiplicity.

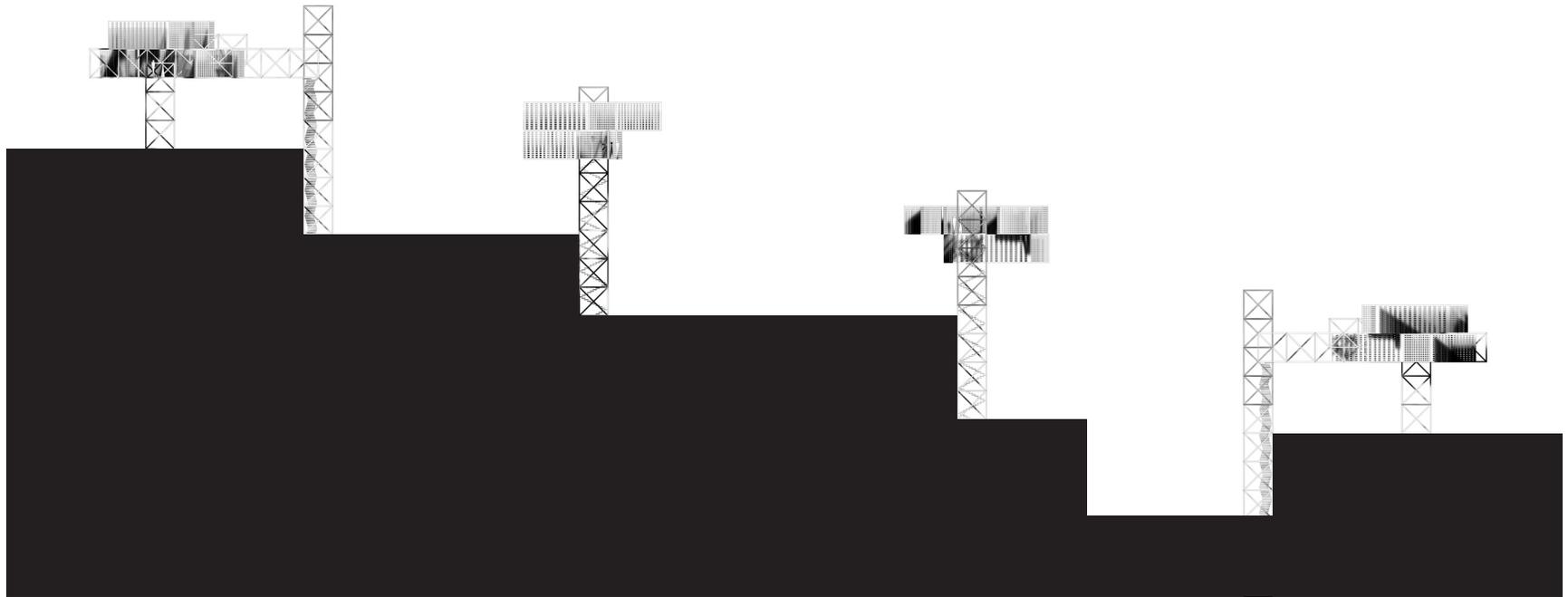
The sea of homogeneous Casbah houses which cascade down in perfect harmony with the topography, are deeply connected and rooted in the landscape. In *Le Folklore est l'expression fleurie des traditions* Le Corbusier notes- in appreciation of the Casbah's connection to nature "The Casbah of Algiers . . . has given the name Algiers-the-White to this glittering apparition that welcomes at dawn the boats arriving from the port. Inscribed in the site, it is irrefutable. It is in consonance with nature." In contrast, the towers have minimal contact with the ground; they instead, use the structural elements of scaffolding

to lightly touch the ground for access and vertical circulation.

The towers, although in context, are in confrontation with it.

They conspicuously exist in defiance of the surrounding formal convention of the Casbah's houses and the inactive state of interregnum in which the society temporally dwells. Through form and function, these active, transitional spaces audibly announce the resurgence of the youth. In this way the towers can be seen as architectural instruments of détournement.





2.3.2.3 *Détournement and the towers*

The design of the tower is highly influenced by the concept of applying *détournement* to the archetypal Casbah house. The dwellings of the Casbah are designed to reflect the Islamic culture's tendency towards exterior modesty and interior richness. The dense agglomeration of houses is inhabited by a population that profoundly values privacy and modesty. Thus the inhabitants are completely cocooned within its architecture and only interact with the outside through the front door and the terrace. Even what is considered exterior space is in the form of a courtyard. It is surrounded and enveloped completely by a layer of rooms that are offset from the center in addition to a second layer of thick opaque walls beyond that. When seen from the outside, a typical house in the Casbah has a sober exterior elevation that is only adorned with small window openings. There is a clear separation between the public street and the private house quarters. However, when the house is accessed, a burst of textures, colors and materials- crafted walls, beautifully

painted tiling and elaborately carved arcades- is discovered behind the sober white walls.

As illustrated by the positive/negative facade studies taken of the neighborhoods, the introverted configuration of the typical Casbah creates a relatively uniform facade that hides intricately segmented space on the inside.

In an exploration, the plan of a cluster of houses was taken and the main elements of the houses (court-yard, stairs and quarters) were- in line with principles of *détournement*- segmented and rearranged to subversively produce an inversion of the inside/outside dichotomy.

The result, illustrated in facade study 2, is a striking play of negative and positive spaces.

Façade Study 1 - Original



Figure 29

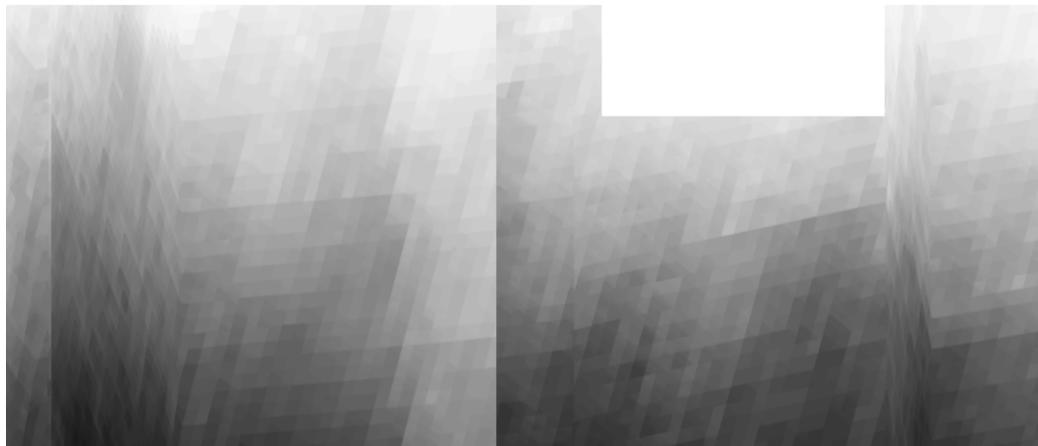


Figure 30

Façade Study 2 - détournement

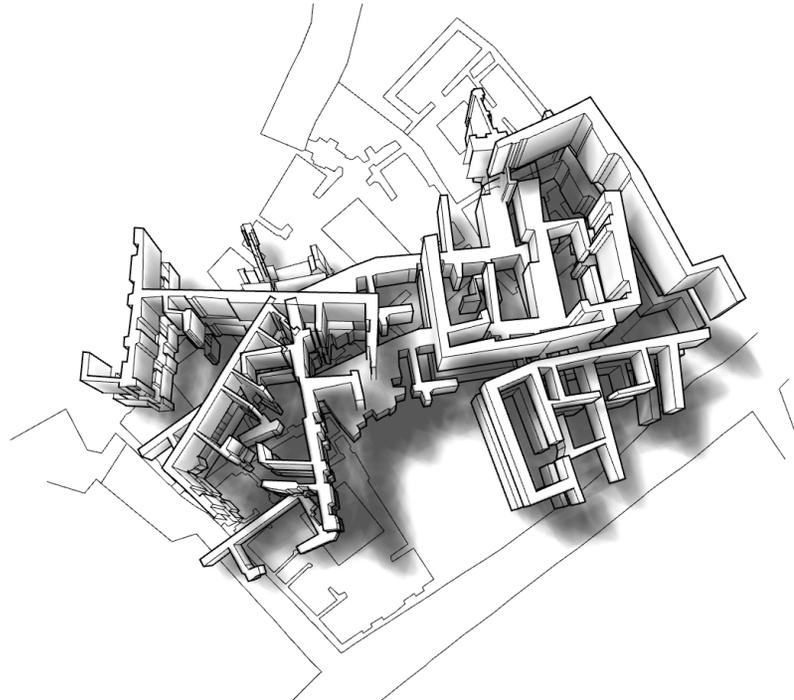
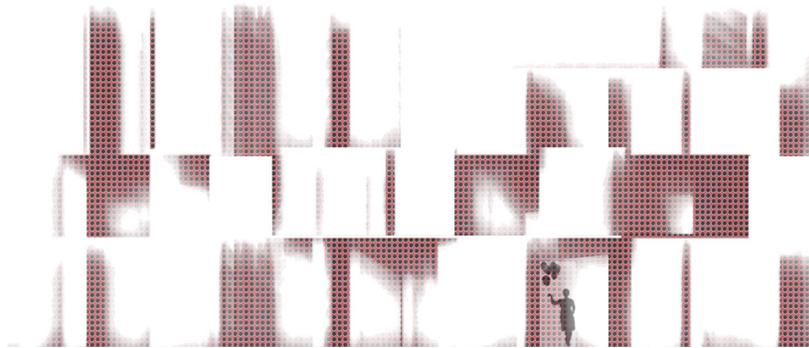


Figure 31

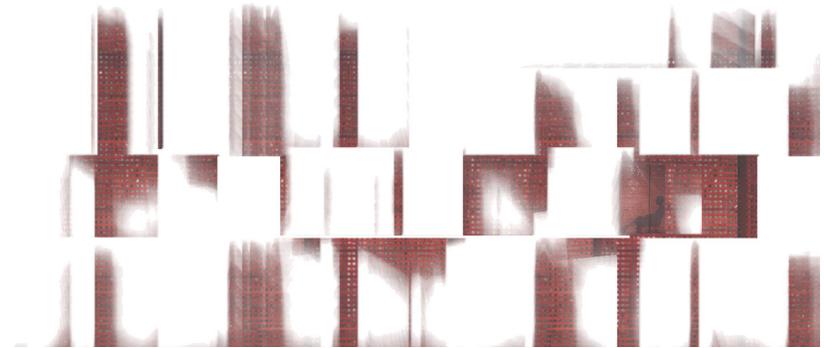


Figure 32

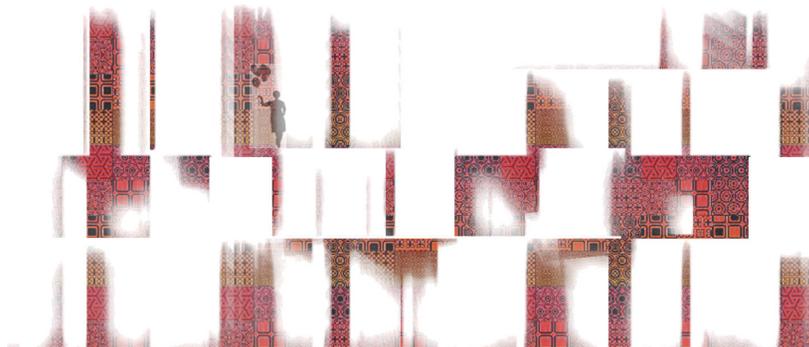
Façade Study 3 - Materials



Perforated metal panels



Mashrabiya wood panels



Tile



Fabric

The courtyard- a negative space- is inverted to become a core of structural support which also contains vertical circulation (elevators- stairs). The rooms unevenly radiate out from the core and open up to the outside. They are shifted back and forth to break up the sober façade into an exciting multifaceted one; thus every time the vantage point changes a new face is revealed- speaking of the activity and diversity that passes through these youth spaces.

The rooms raise to hover above the ground as the core – made of thin steel columns - becomes the only element of the tower connected to the ground. This creates a clear vertical divide between the tower and its context. It shatters the idea of the central panoptic eye into fragments of surveillance towers that reclaim the above air space. Moreover, its detachment from the ground conflicts the compliance of the surrounding Casbah houses to the topography.

The materials used in the building envelope alternate between glass and perforated steel mesh panels that can be rearranged to add a playful element to the towers and to poke fun at the introverted context around it.

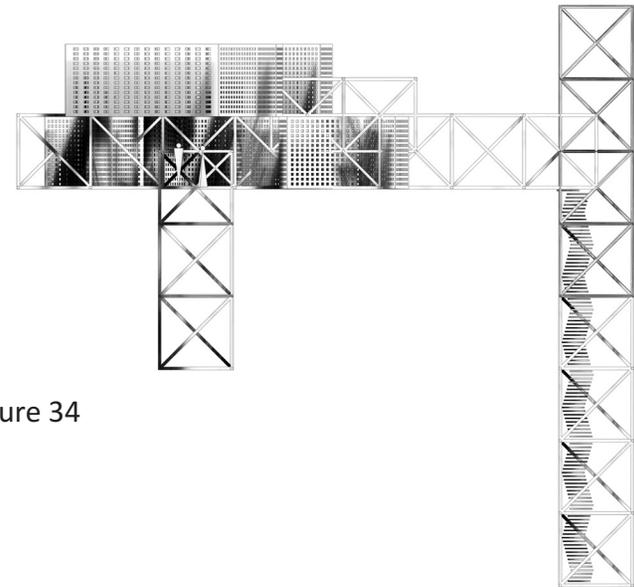


Figure 34

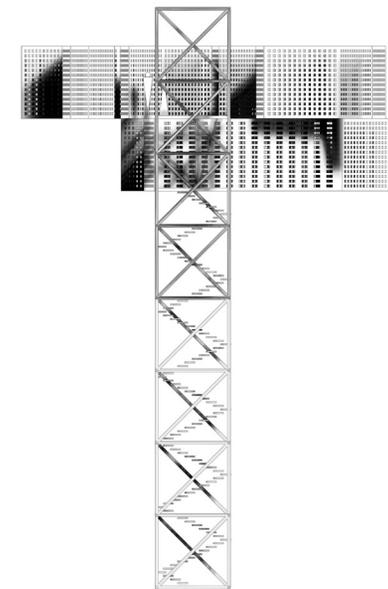
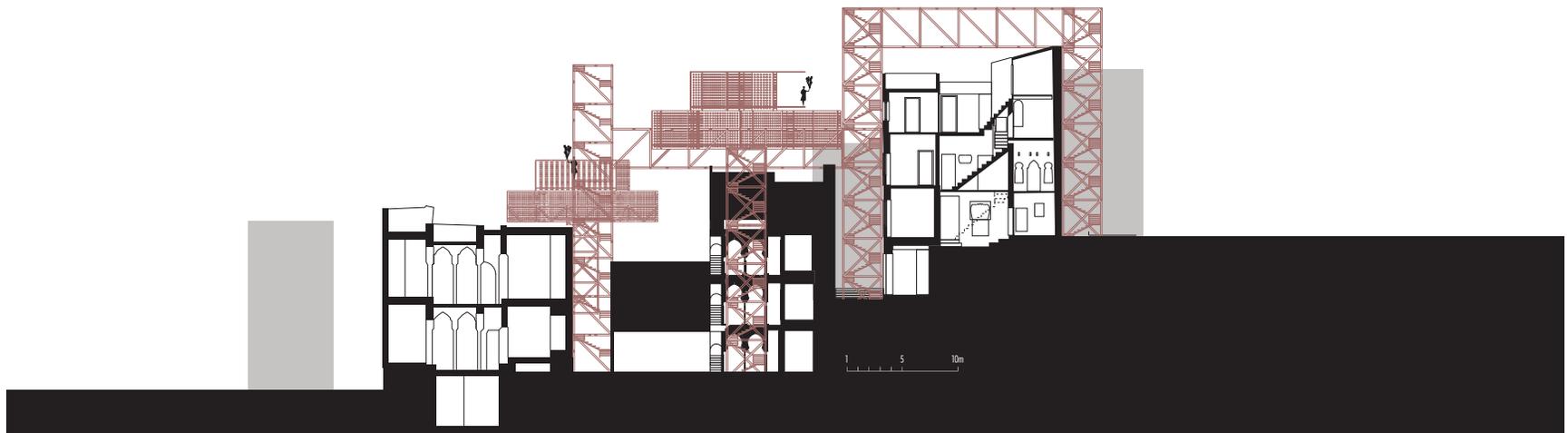
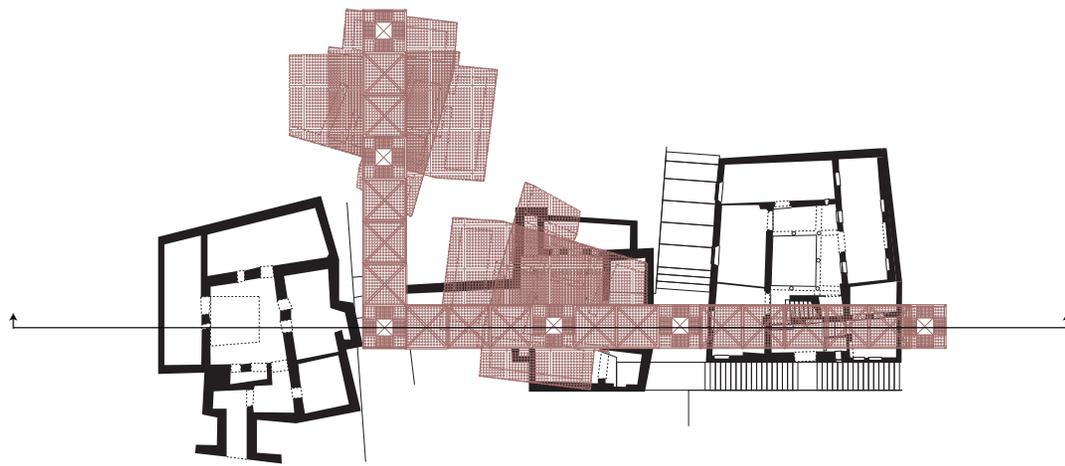
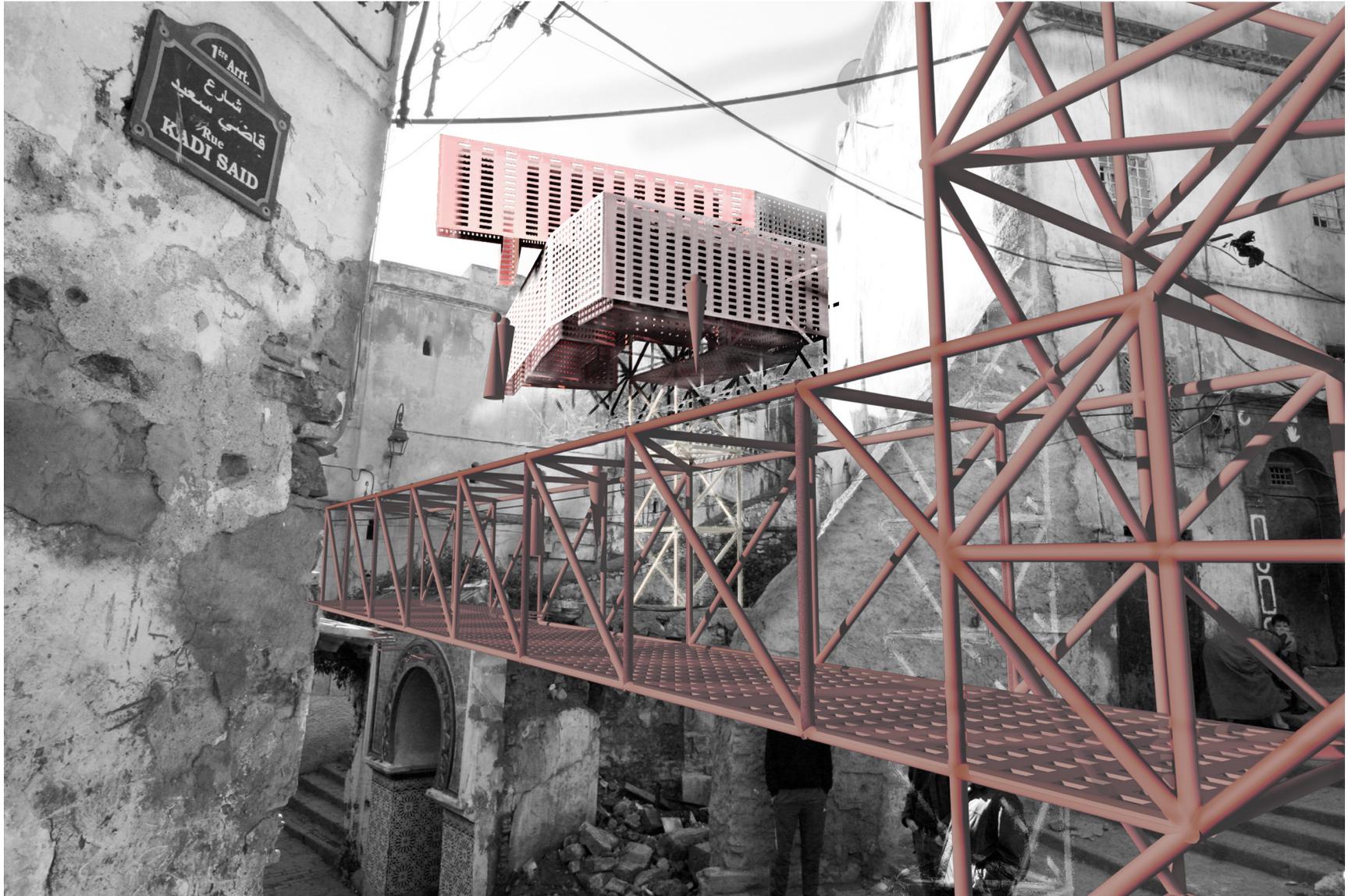
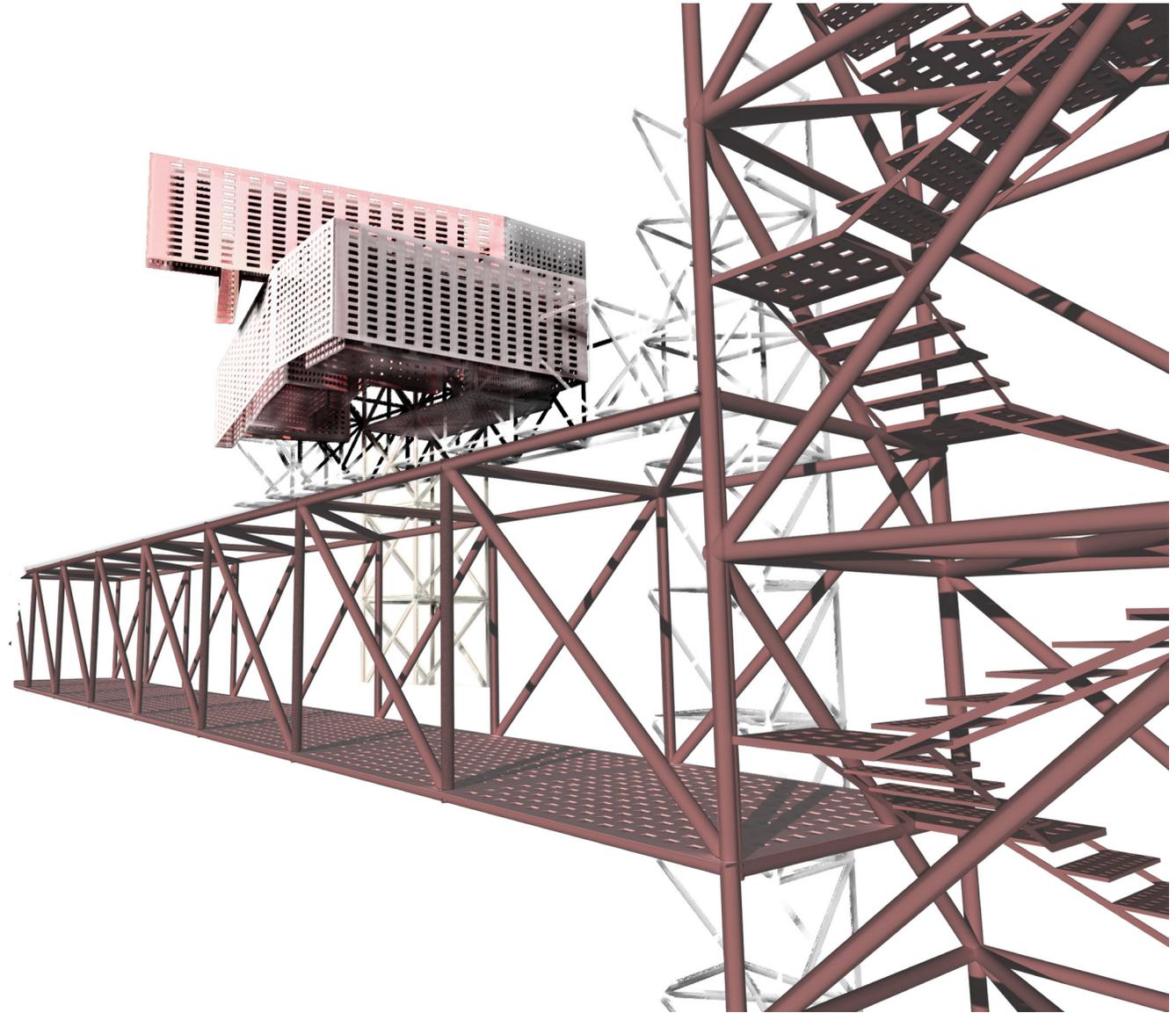


Figure 35









3 POSTSCRIPT

This thesis began as preoccupation by the lack of agency in the state of interregnum that followed the brutal Algerian Civil War, and its marginalizing effects on the youth of Algiers. The initial question posed was how can architecture respond to this state and mediate agency? The Casbah of Algiers, by the inherent characteristics of subversion, resistance and antagonism in its spatial configuration uncovered the concept of the counter-space. The Casbah became first, a vehicle of exploration and understanding of this concept, and subsequently the site of action of the project. A contemporary counter-space, as a concept, was therefore reimagined and adapted in response to the Casbah in the form of an urban and architectural intervention aimed at the youth.

The aspirations for the project, in its current context, is to supplement the architectural and urban strategy devised in the thesis with content and program to respond to the youth's

needs. Furthermore, the aspiration of the thesis is to serve as a precedent in the reimagination of the counter-space that transcends its current contextual limitation- Casbah. As scaffolding, in its temporary nature, is eventually disassembled; so will the towers and the paths. The Counter-Space, however, as a concept, can be reimagined and recreated wherever and whenever needed. Any context in need of a counter-space poses as a possible site of action. The counter-space as concept transcends formal restrictions proposed in this project and morphs as it is moved from one context to another.

In Tschumi's words "[...]just as Darwin's finches on Galápagos evolved from one "founder" population into numerous species with each occupying a particular niche, a concept can mutate as it is inserted into different contexts[...]Adaptation is universal but its techniques are infinite." [i]

Infinitely reimaging the counter-space...

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Figures

All images belong to the author, unless noted otherwise.

Figure 2- Image obtained directly from the author. Halim Faidi.

Figure 7- Image obtained directly from the author. Halim Faidi.

Figure 9- Still from Battle of Algiers. Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas, Brahim Haggiag, Jean Martin, Yacef Saadi, Samia Kerbash, Ugo Paletti, M. Gatti, Ennio Morricone, *La Bataille D'alger: The Battle of Algiers*, (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2004).

Figure 10 - Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon penitentiary, Willey Reveley, 1791

Figure 11- Still from Battle of Algiers. Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas, Brahim Haggiag, Jean Martin, Yacef Saadi, Samia Kerbash, Ugo Paletti, M. Gatti, Ennio Morricone, *La Bataille D'alger: The Battle of Algiers*, (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2004).

Figure 12 -Stephanie, Age 6, Surveillance versus Sousveillance. Image release as GFDL. 2013

Figure 13 - Meta-institute by Lebbeus Woods.

Figure 15 a, b,c - photographs taken by Marc Riboud in postcolonial Algeria. Marc Riboud, "ALGERIA, 1960-69," SITE DU PHOTOGRAPHE MARC RIBOUD, <http://www.marcriboud.com/marcriboud/accueil.html>, (accessed February 2, 2015).

Figure 19 - The image is an edit by the author of the original photograph of Toufik Lerari, *Bab El Oued - Avril 2009. 2009*. Digital Image. Available from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Casbah_of_Algers_buildings_in_restoration.jpg (accessed June 10, 2015).

Figure 20 - The image is an edit by the author of the original photograph of Andrew Farrand, *The Casbah of Algiers: An Imperiled Heritage*. Ibn Ibn Battuta. Digital Image. Available from: <http://www.ibnibnbattuta.com/2015/03/casbah-algiers-imperiled-heritage.html>, (accessed June 10, 2015).

Figure 21 - The image is an edit by the author of the original photograph of Johan Després, *effondrement casbah*. 2014. Digital Image. Available from: <http://www.terre-despres.net/la-casbah-dalger/> (accessed July 04, 2015)

Figure 37 - The image is an edit by the author of the original photograph of Magharebia. 2011. Digital Image. Available from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/magharebia/5571578146/> (accessed Jne 25, 2015)

(Endnotes)

- 1 Barker, Chris. "Agency." In *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, 5-6. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2004. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446221280.n6>.
- 2 As Defined by the understanding of the author from general description of Jaffar Lesbet's analysis of the Casbah as an "*espace contre*" in his book *La Casbah d'Alger*. Djaffar Lesbet. *La Casbah d'Alger: gestion urbaine et vide social*. (Alger: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1900).
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- 7 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/565>
- 8 Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12-13.
- 9 Zeynep Celik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.14-15.
- 10 Ibid, p.27.

- 11 *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Georges-Eugene, Baron Haussmann", accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Georges-Eugene-Baron-Haussmann>.
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