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ПРЕОБРАЗОВАНИЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОГО РАЙОНА КАСБА В АЛЖИРЕ: ОТ УПАДКА К УСТОЙЧИВОМУ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМУ НАСЛЕДИЮ

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Аннотация. В условиях быстрого экономического роста, растущих потребностей и меняющегося образа жизни многие исторические центры арабского мира с трудом приспособляются к современным потребностям. Яркий пример — Касба в Алжире, где, несмотря на сокращение числа домов из-за ветхости, плотность населения выросла до 4000 человек на гектар, что делает ее одним из самых густонаселенных районов в мире. Отсутствие основных услуг и неадекватная санитария еще больше ухудшили условия, превратив Касбу в городские трущобы в самом сердце Алжира. Этот район находится в критическом состоянии для сохранения городской среды. Хотя ЮНЕСКО в декабре 1992 г. внесла ее в Список Всемирного наследия, Касба продолжает приходить в упадок. Из 1200 исторических зданий, существовавших в 1962 г., сегодня сохранилось только 400, и их число продолжает сокращаться. Культурное значение Касбы должно быть признано важнейшим активом для будущего развития. В данной статье предпринята попытка предложить неотложную комплексную стратегию устойчивого развития и сохранения городской среды, которая позволит предотвратить исчезновение Касбы и превратить ее в живое наследие.

Ключевые слова: Касба, устойчивое развитие городов, жилые объекты культурного наследия, городские трущобы, сохранение

Original article

TRANSFORMING THE OLD CITY CASBAH OF ALGIERS: FROM DECAY TO A SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract. Amidst rapid economic growth, increasing demands, and evolving lifestyles, many historic centers in the Arab world have struggled to adapt to modern needs. The Casbah of Algiers is a striking example, where, despite a shrinking number of homes due to neglect, population density has surged to 4,000 people per hectare, ranking it among the most densely populated areas globally. The lack of basic services and inadequate sanitation has further worsened conditions, turning the Casbah into an urban slum in the heart of Algiers. This area represents a critical case for urban preservation. Although UNESCO designated it a World Heritage site in December 1992, the Casbah has continued to fall into disrepair. Out of 1,200 historic buildings that existed in 1962, only 400 remain today, with

the number still declining. The cultural significance of the Casbah must be recognized as an essential asset for future development. This paper seeks to propose an urgent, integrated urban conservation strategy to prevent the Casbah from disappearing and transform it into a sustainable living heritage.

Keywords: La Casbah, urban sustainability, living heritage, urban slum, conservation

INTRODUCTION

Amidst rapid economic growth, population expansion, and evolving lifestyles, many historic urban areas in the Arab world have struggled to adapt to the demands of the present. These historic centers now serve not only as housing for migrants but also as productive hubs within expanding cities. Positioned centrally, they are required to function as city centers, thereby helping to sustain the medinas and contributing to the cities' economic development. According to experts, travelers often seek destinations where they can experience traditional cultures within their historical contexts. Given the significance of heritage to tourism, the limited attention directed toward heritage preservation brings up the issue of heritage tourism.

There is a growing consensus that most historic city centers in the Arab world are under significant pressure to preserve their unique qualities. Competing land use needs, the introduction of new economic activities, and the commodification of heritage resources have placed considerable strain on local heritage stakeholders. They are tasked with managing these assets effectively to protect them from the risks posed by mass tourism and overuse. Striking a balance between visitor access and the need for conservation is a key challenge. In recent years, new policy approaches have emerged to reconcile the tensions between conservation and development, focusing on sustainable development in historic cities. These challenges will be examined through the case study of the Casbah of Algiers in Algeria, a World Heritage Site under threat. Through this case study, the broader implications of the sustainability versus historic city center debate will be discussed.

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³ Шенков А. С. Проблемы трансформации использования исторических сооружений // Современная архитектура мира. 2023. № 2 (21). С. 284–300.

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URBAN SUSTAINABILITY & CONSERVATION

What is sustainable development? The concept was most famously defined in the 1987 report *Our Common Future* by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). According to this definition, “Sustainable development is development that satisfies the needs of the present generation without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The Brundtland Commission highlights essential human needs, such as food, water, clothing, shelter, employment, energy, and hygiene, as examples of these basic needs¹.

Sustainable development is now recognized as a key driver for urban conservation planning. At its core, it involves a process of urban growth that emphasizes the continual reuse of existing structures, while minimizing energy consumption for their adaptation to new societal needs. It is also understood as a development approach rooted in local culture, promoting an equitable distribution of urban services, applying democratic management principles, and preserving and revitalizing traditional social values and practices. Related problems are studied in Russian architectural urban science².

From a sustainability viewpoint, cultural heritage is seen as a non-renewable resource, embodying some of the most significant intangible values of society, such as identity, memory, self-awareness, and history. Furthermore, it is a valuable asset that can add meaning to new developments by incorporating established values into modern processes³. As a human creation, a city is an artifact made up of various historically identifiable components.

In an increasingly competitive global market where spatial and temporal barriers are dissolving, the identity of a place — its character, history, architecture, culture, and uniqueness — becomes essential⁴. With the rapid globalization of resources, information, and expertise, the distinctiveness of a historic city becomes a crucial factor in attracting financial and human investment⁵. This local-global dynamic helps explain why local heritage stakeholders strive to gain a competitive edge over other historic areas. Cities that effectively promote and market their historical wealth tend to be more appealing to investors and visitors, particularly tourists⁶.

In heritage cities, history and cultural heritage have become valuable assets that bridge the local and global spheres. These elements establish a city’s unique identity and distinctiveness, making it highly attractive to an increasingly global tourist market. At the same time, they shape the localized economic patterns driven by both national and international investments. However, the commercialization, interpretation, and replication of a place’s history have their limits. The historical assets of a city can suffer deterioration if “over-consumed” by rising numbers of visitors, placing pressure on the city for new forms of development.

In many historic cities, this strain leads to what is termed “local fatigue”, where excessive use of local infrastructure and historic buildings, along with land demands, creates social conflict between visitors and residents, as well as negative environmental impacts from tourism. These tensions between development and conservation have brought forward the need for sustainable development policies to mitigate the depletion of resources. This understanding suggests that there are limits to the level of development a historic city can accommodate without compromising its heritage. As Jacobs notes, “There is a limit to the amount of development an area can sustain over time, determined by its environmental characteristics... If development surpasses this level, the resulting damage to these features becomes unsustainable or unacceptable, and should therefore be restricted”⁷.

Historic cities possess unique qualities that ensure their conservation and long-term sustainability. This implies that development in these areas must be carefully managed, striking a balance between limiting growth and maintaining local economic vitality. Most heritage experts agree that such places cannot sustain themselves without active interventions to manage their physical and social fabric, which form the foundation of their identity and economic success. This allows for a variety of sustainable economic development approaches to coexist within and between cities, whether they focus on limiting growth, enhancing growth, or integrating both strategies⁸.



THE RAPID CHANGE & CASBAH OF ALGIERS

1. A view of the Casbah from the lower section, with the Ketchaoua Mosque prominently visible in the foreground, one of the key landmarks of the historic center (Source: <https://stock.adobe.com/jp/images/the-mosque-of-ketchaoua-and-the-ancient-part-of-old-city-of-algeria-called-casbah-unesco-world-heritage-site/579406178>)

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⁷ Jacobs, M. (1997). *Making Sense of Environmental Capacity*. Council for the Protection of Rural England, London.

⁸ Strange, I. (1999). *Urban Sustainability, Globalization, and the Pursuit of Heritage Aesthetic*. *Planning Practice and Research*, 14 (2), 301–311.

⁹ Lesbet, D. (1987). *La Gestion de la Salubrité à la Casbah*. *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, 33, 59–68.

¹⁰ Ministry of Culture and Communication (1992). *Avant-Projet du Plan Général de Sauvegarde de la Casbah d'Alger*. Algiers: Ministry of Culture and Communication.

¹¹ Lesbet, D. (1985). *La Casbah d'Alger: Gestion Urbaine et Vide Social*. Algiers: OPU.

Algiers covers an area of 276 km² and has a population exceeding 3 million. The Casbah is located on the northern coast of the city. Its intricate labyrinths and the fortress, dating back to the 1500s, serve as reminders of its rich past. The Casbah of Algiers (Fig. 1), founded in the 6th century BC, was built on a steep slope rising 118 meters, overlooking the harbor bay and the Mediterranean Sea.

Historically, its primary roles were military and trade. As a significant symbol of Algerian history at the heart of the capital, the Casbah represents an urgent case for urban conservation. In 1992, UNESCO recognized the Casbah of Algiers as a World Heritage Site, yet it has since suffered ongoing deterioration. Its population surged from 60,000 in 1969 to 70,000 by 1980, doubling since 1830. While the number of homes has decreased, population density has intensified, reaching 4,000 people per hectare in several districts, one of the highest densities globally⁹.

Since independence, many of the original residents, who were part of traditional urban families, have gradually left the Casbah, moving to modern homes and apartments on the city's outskirts. In 1962, the Casbah had around 1,200 traditional buildings dating back to the Ottoman era. Thirty years later, 250 of these structures had disappeared, representing a loss of about 20%¹⁰. Many of the remaining houses were rented to rural families migrating to the city, while the number of homes continued to decline due to deterioration and collapse. Between 1975 and 1979 alone, around 50 homes collapsed¹¹.

Alongside the collapse of residential buildings, numerous important public facilities also vanished (Fig. 2). Of the 130 mosques and 18 zaouias (Quranic schools) that once stood, only 10 mosques and 2 zaouias remain. Additionally, only six of the original 100 hamams (public baths) have survived. The lack of legislation and planning to safeguard the Casbah allowed for unchecked development. When a house was demolished, it was often replaced by



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2. Illustrating the deterioration and neglect that have turned the Casbah into an urban slum in the heart of the capital (Source: <https://www.culturealgerie.com/tag/algiers-casbah/>)

an apartment building, disrupting the historic landscape and blocking sea views for neighboring residents.

The ongoing cycle of decay and neglect has led to the Casbah being perceived as an urban slum in the heart of the capital. It is associated with low-income and struggling families, marked by overcrowding, poverty, violence, and insecurity. Currently, 70,000 people live in the Casbah, spread over 37 hectares, with 13 hectares consisting of vacant land from collapsed buildings. With an average of 12 people per room, traditional houses originally built for single families now house approximately six families each, often one family per room. As a result,

common areas like central courtyards, corridors, and kitchens have been occupied and subdivided.

Only 400 dwellings remain intact, and this number is likely to drop significantly unless urgent intervention is made. Sustainable development and heritage tourism could become key drivers for the Casbah's social and economic revitalization. After years of neglect and marginalization, these strategies could help the Casbah reclaim its prominent place in the rapidly growing city of Algiers.

A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT APPROACH IS NEEDED

Since 1962, the state has made multiple attempts to preserve the Casbah through various conservation plans, yet none have been fully implemented. While some monuments and homes have been restored, no comprehensive effort has been made to address the entire urban center. The challenge of conserving the Casbah is highly complex, as it represents a difficult balance between providing adequate housing for low-income residents and addressing the urgent need for rehabilitation. Now that the Casbah is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is critical to prevent it from becoming a "world heritage at risk".

To begin the process of conserving the Casbah, several key steps should be taken. First, a thorough survey and inventory of the remaining buildings is essential. Next, decisions must be made regarding which structures should be conserved, based on their condition and historical significance. A typological analysis of houses and monuments should also be conducted to guide future design, especially in infill and reconstruction projects. Lastly, a participatory approach must be adopted to involve local residents in the rehabilitation process.

In addition to housing, heritage tourism could play a significant role in the Casbah's revitalization. The traditional distinction between the residential (private) and commercial (public) areas of the Casbah should be preserved. The upper Casbah should be rehabilitated primarily for housing, while the lower Casbah should focus on tourism and commercial activities. Infill and reconstruction projects should be carefully planned to provide sufficient housing for residents while encouraging tourism in the lower areas. Heritage tourism could serve as a catalyst for sustaining the historic center by bringing in much-needed revenue, which could then be used to finance the restoration and improvement of the remaining dwellings in the upper Casbah, breathing new life into the historic area.

It is essential for those involved in heritage conservation to remember that the Casbah's true value lies in it being a lived-in space; it reflects both its historical past and the lives of the people who reside and work there. Any

sustainable development strategy must prioritize improving the living conditions of its inhabitants. While tourism can be promoted, the commercialization and consumption of the Casbah's heritage should be carefully managed to avoid compromising its unique identity and character.

To transform the Casbah from its current image as an urban slum, it is crucial to revitalize the area by injecting new life into it. It is essential to recognize that the residents of the Casbah deserve the right to live in dignified housing, have access to employment, and take pride in their historic surroundings. The first step should be to halt the influx of rural migrants into the Casbah. The second step should focus on reducing the overcrowding by decreasing the number of

3. Illustrating the potential for revitalizing the streets of the Casbah with renewed vibrancy and activity
(Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/835910380820985447/>)



families per house from six to three. This can be accomplished by reconstructing the demolished homes on the vacant land within the area.

The right to work is a key aspect of sustainable development. As a third measure, efforts should be made to revive the traditional crafts that are disappearing from the Casbah. Restoring these crafts will breathe new life into the area, contributing to its economic and social sustainability (Fig. 3). This initiative will create job opportunities for many unemployed residents. Once the primary heritage resources are preserved and cultural and economic activities are strengthened, these heritage assets can be showcased to visitors and tourists, further boosting the Casbah's revitalization.

The situation of the Casbah, along with other historic city centers in the Arab world, is particularly concerning. These historic areas are both the embodiment and the vessel of urban heritage. While heritage tourism is a valuable activity for both visitors and the local population, it presents a significant challenge for cultural resource managers, who must minimize the damage that visitors may cause to these sites. The following key principles emerge as essential for effective visitor management in the Casbah and other historic areas:

- **Comprehensive tourist development plans** are crucial as a foundation for unlocking tourism potential.

- Any tourist development plan should ensure that both conservation efforts, in the broadest sense, and tourism activities mutually benefit from it.

- **The long-term well-being of the local community** should be the primary consideration when choosing options for tourist development.

- **Educational programs** should encourage tourists to respect and appreciate the local culture, history, lifestyle, and religious practices.

- The **design of buildings, sites, and transportation systems** must minimize any negative visual impacts caused by tourism.

- **Pollution control measures** should be integrated into all forms of infrastructure.

- Tourism management should establish acceptable levels of development and include controls to maintain those limits.

- **Local community participation** should be encouraged throughout the planning and development phases.

- Implement appropriate **protective measures** to restrict visitor access to sensitive areas within the historic center.

These principles are essential for managing tourism in historic urban areas. In many cases, where funding is insufficient to preserve cultural heritage, tourism can provide the financial resources necessary for restoration and conservation efforts across entire historic districts. Ultimately, these principles aim to ensure that heritage tourism is a benefit, not a burden, to both the host community and visitors.

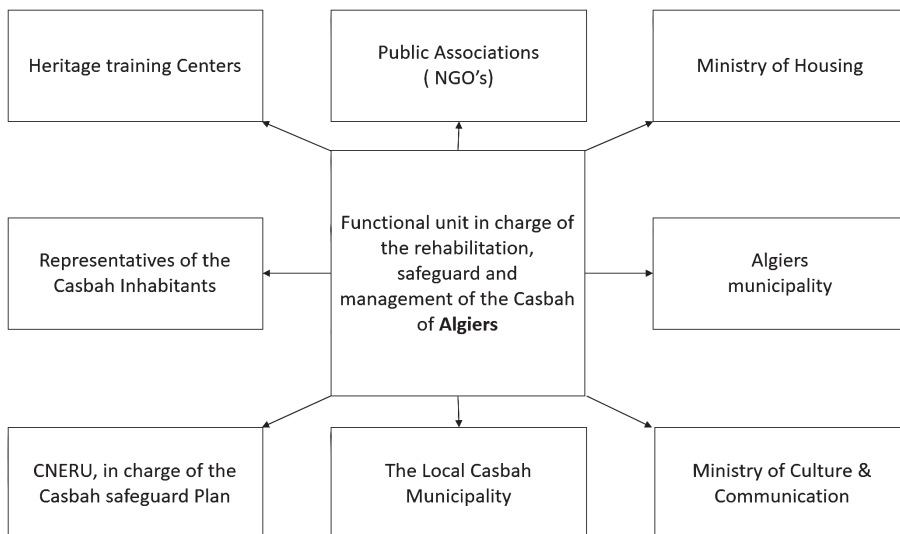
Diagram 1. A Suggested Organizational Structure for the Casbah of Algiers

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¹² Ministry of Culture and Communication (1992). *Avant-Projet du Plan Général de Sauvegarde de la Casbah d'Alger*. Algiers: Ministry of Culture and Communication.

The concept of sustainability in historic city centers remains a subject of ongoing study. More research is needed to refine the application of sustainable development strategies in the Arab world, especially in relation to the built heritage. While specific indicators for sustainability in these areas have yet to be fully developed, several general guidelines can be suggested to support the sustainable conservation and development of the Casbah and other historic city centers in the region:

- **Respect community life** by focusing on local values and traditions.
- **Enhance the quality of life** for residents.
- **Preserve identity, diversity, and vitality** within the historic center.
- **Minimize the loss of irreplaceable heritage assets.**
 - **Involve both public and private sectors** in the conservation process.
 - **Empower community action and responsibility** through active participation.
 - Develop a **strategy to integrate conservation and development.**
 - Establish clear limits on the degree of change permissible in historic areas.



— Address concerns like **gentrification** and **authenticity** when applying sustainable development methods.

These actions cannot be fully realized without the active participation of local residents. Therefore, it is essential to encourage community involvement, alongside collaboration with heritage associations and local authorities. The local authorities, who are responsible for managing the remaining 400 historic buildings, play a crucial role in this process. Effective heritage management is key to balancing conservation efforts with the appropriate marketing and reuse of heritage assets, ensuring that sustainability and development coexist harmoniously.

Diagram 1 illustrates a proposed management framework aimed at conserving the Casbah. The primary coordinating entity is the Functional Unit responsible for the Rehabilitation, Safeguard, and Management of the Casbah of Algiers, which serves as a liaison among various heritage stakeholders. To effectively implement the recent Casbah Safeguard Plan, this coordinating unit must maintain close communication with the Algiers Municipality and the ministries of Culture and Housing. Furthermore, it should be accessible to Casbah residents, the wider public, various associations, and training and research institutions. Consequently, it is essential for this unit to be situated in the heart of the Casbah.

THE LIVING HERITAGE: LA CASBAH

The citadel marked the initial restoration project within the Casbah. This heritage complex includes the Dey Castle, the Beys' castles, two mosques, gardens, and various annexes, spanning an area of 11,000 square meters. Restoration efforts commenced in the late 1960s and continue to this day. The restoration of the historical monument known as Bastion 23 was the second significant endeavor, initiated in July 1988, and it has since opened to the public as a museum (Fig. 4). This historic site consists of three palaces, nine houses, and defensive structures, covering an area of 4,000 square meters. Together, these two landmarks serve as key boundaries between the upper and lower sections of the Casbah, repurposed as museums and cultural centers, making them major attractions for both local and international visitors.

In addition to these significant restoration efforts, approximately 37 residential units have been renovated, alongside the development of new areas. These infill projects aim to revitalize and improve the living conditions of local residents, laying the groundwork for sustainable development. Moreover, two major streets in the Casbah, Rue Rabah Riab and Sidi Driss Hamidouche, have undergone rehabilitation, along with the reconstruction of five public fountains¹². While these initiatives are designed to enhance living conditions, they also serve as a crucial catalyst for fostering a sustainable living heritage (Fig. 5).

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4. An Interior View of Bastion 23
(Source: <https://agesmystery.ru/rubriki/zodchestvo/staraya-kasba-v-alzhire/>)

5. Depicting a Restored Street within the Casbah (Source: https://www.routard.com/photos/algerie/1509726-alger___palais_des_rais.htm)

ПРИМЕЧАНИЯ

¹³ Zadem, R. (2002, May 4–6). *Rétrospective des Projets de Revalorisation de la Casbah d'Alger – Mise en Contexte*. In *Proceedings of the Lumières sur la Ville Conference, Algiers, Algeria*.

¹⁴ Pickard, R. (2001). *Management of Historic Centres*. London and New York: Spon Press.

Despite facing security challenges over the past decade, the Ministry of Culture and Communication successfully executed 13 restoration projects between 1994 and 2000 with the help of Italian experts. These efforts primarily focused on restoring significant monuments, including 10 mosques, one castle (Dar Aziza), and the Bastion 23 complex. Additionally, several refurbishment works were carried out on key buildings in the Basse Casbah to re-establish the historical connection between the Casbah and the sea, which is fundamental to its identity¹³. This revived link has transformed the area into a vibrant hub for tourists, featuring shopping options and a diverse array of restaurants.

It is evident that the Casbah has never undergone a comprehensive restoration effort. Most of the work done so far has been fragmented, producing minimal impact and falling short of the standards expected for a World Heritage site. Since 1962, only a small number of buildings have been restored or rehabilitated, and these are primarily monuments. Residential structures, on the other hand, remain in a severe state of disrepair and are deteriorating rapidly. This approach will neither preserve nor sustain the Casbah for future generations. The lack of progress is largely attributed to insufficient political will and a lack of funding. However, heritage tourism could play a key role in revitalizing the Casbah, both socially and economically. It could also generate the necessary financial resources to support the ongoing conservation efforts throughout the heritage site.

Given the challenges faced by historic cities in the Arab world, further research and analysis are needed. The notion that effective conservation and management require a unified strategy is based on the following principles:

Historic centers hold significance only when inhabited, serving as a living connection to the past and its people.

The use and promotion of heritage resources should be balanced, ensuring that the identity and uniqueness of historic cities are not compromised.

Any development in these areas must aim to improve the living conditions of residents and address their basic needs.

The dire state of the Casbah highlights that the core issue in urban conservation lies in the development of urban management policies and community engagement initiatives. These strategies are crucial for maintaining the conservation and regeneration of this historic site. Achieving this goal will require strong collaboration between the private sector, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to safeguard this irreplaceable cultural heritage. The objective should be to transform the Casbah from a heritage site at risk into a vibrant and thriving urban center once again.

For the preservation of built heritage to contribute to the creation of a sustainable society, the static goal of protection must be balanced with the dynamic processes of change. The ability of historic centers to adapt will depend on the relative value placed on heritage assets and the priorities of each society¹⁴.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of conserving the Casbah presents a complex paradox, balancing the urgent need to provide adequate housing for its low-income residents with the pressing necessity of rehabilitating the site. As the Casbah remains on the “World Heritage List”, it is critical to prevent it from slipping into the status of a “World Heritage at Risk”.

This paper aims to outline a suitable conservation management strategy for the Casbah of Algiers. The Functional Unit in Charge of the Rehabilitation, Safeguard, and Management of the Casbah plays a key role in coordinating the various heritage stakeholders. To successfully implement the recent Casbah Safeguard Plan, this unit must maintain close collaboration with the Algiers Municipality, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Housing. Equally important is fostering strong connections with the Casbah’s inhabitants and the wider community.

To revive the Casbah, a series of immediate steps and measures are essential:

- Conduct a comprehensive survey and inventory of the remaining buildings.
- Determine which structures should be prioritized for conservation.
- Identify and study rescued buildings to serve as models for future infill and reconstruction projects.
- Encourage a participatory approach by involving local residents in the rehabilitation process.

To preserve the Casbah as a “living heritage”, the upper Casbah should be rehabilitated for residential purposes, while the lower Casbah should be developed to accommodate tourism and commercial activities. Reconstruction and infill projects should focus on providing adequate housing for the local population while also promoting tourism in the lower part of the Casbah.

Heritage stakeholders must recognize that the Casbah holds significance only when it remains inhabited, as it is a living reflection of both its past and the people who live and work there. Supporting the right to work is crucial for sustainable development, which makes it essential to revive the traditional crafts that are gradually disappearing from the Casbah. This revival would breathe new life into the area, contributing to both its economic and social sustainability.

Conserving the Casbah goes beyond simply restoring a few buildings; it requires preserving the vibrancy of the entire historic center. The challenges faced by the Casbah are collective, and its preservation is crucial not only for Algiers but also as a model for other historic cities across Algeria, such as Constantine, Temacine, Ghardaia, and Dellys. The Casbah represents an example that could either inspire hope or signal defeat for the future of historic

centers throughout the Arab world. Therefore, the proposed conservation strategy must be implemented urgently to prevent further losses of the Casbah's cultural heritage.

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