A critical assessment of the housing sector in Algeria: beyond challenges and opportunities, a sustainable built environment at stake

Abstract: The term sustainable development includes human development, values and cultures. We are referring to sustainable human development in order to emphasize issues such as the importance of housing quality and participation in decision-making process. Offering many dwellings, the new urban spaces in Algeria are supposed to respond today’s population needs, their construction capacity is important, they are aired and endowed of important facilities. But, are they really a place where people want to live, now and in the future? What about urban harmony and wellbeing in this case? We will consider, in this paper, housing projects in Algeria while analysing the new built environments in Algiers, a representative example at the national scale when it comes to housing, with the case of Zerhouni city in particular, one of its nearest and recent suburban area.

Keywords: housing, built environment, heritage, sustainable development, welfare.

The housing sector in Algeria: which challenges for the decision-makers? Which opportunities for the inhabitants?

Housing is a basic requirement for everyone. In Algeria, housing shortage gets the political powers to intervene, launching important programs of housing, achieved in the briefest delays. Residential development takes more and more extent in urban periphery. However, housing shortage is far from being resolved. According to the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism, the first economic plan launched between 1999 and 2003 permitted the realization of 693,800 housings with almost a half million in rental public housing and social-participative housing, with an average cadence of 140,000 housings realized per year. A good performance when one knows that the independent Algeria never passed the rate of 100,000 housings per year. The supplementary programs (1999-2003) recorded more than 1,250,000 housings (32,000 for the South, 37,000 for the High Plateaux and 56,000 various). If the rate of occupation by housing decreased distinctly between 1998 and 2003, while passing from 7.2 to 5.5 people by housing, the situation stayed nevertheless critical.

To face a deficit estimated to 1.1 million of housings, the government announced a new program that spreads from 2005 to 2009 with:

- 24.9% of rental public housing, (a group of block of flats built with public money for low-income families).
- 20.9% of social-participative housing, (this category of housing is based on the claimant's financial participation: 30% advanced by the claimant, 30% as a banking loan and 30% as a non-refundable help from the Algerian State).
- 10.3% of renting-sale housing, (this category of housing allows the claimant to pay his dwelling by easy terms: 10% to begin, 15% when the block of flats is achieved, and the rest payable monthly during 25 years).
- 3.1% of promotional housing, (realized by property developers, promotional housing is characterised by its high quality, its big surface and its good finishes, the access to this private property being truly out of range for a lot of households).
- 40.8% of rural housing, (a group of small homes built with public money to encourage low-income families to stay in the countryside instead of moving to the nearest towns).
- Without forgetting the private housing, otherwise said, the whole individual homes constructed by Algerian citizens by using their own financial means.

The construction of more than one million housings was expected therefore for 2009 by the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism. The new quinquennial Plan (2010-2014) intended to reinforce the intention of the Algerian State to continue its intense answer to housing demand according to the speech of the President of the Republic. Another million of various categories of housings will be delivered during these five years. The new Prime Minister added last 16 October 2012 that a complementary program of 1,450,000 housings has been launched. In all, 2,450,000 housings will be achieved during this quinquennial.

Today, an intense real estate development advocates a collective habitat. The latter consumes less space and generates collective displacements, articulates itself around a setting aiming all social categories, encourages the diversification of housing models and encourages the participation of citizens. However, the acuteness of the residential crisis doesn't stop persisting despite the efforts of the State to attenuate it. Indeed, 199,653 housings have been delivered in 2009, 179,112 delivered in 2010 and more of 181,829 housings delivered in 2011. In the same way, the Algerian State launches every year new housing projects. Let's mention for instance, the 324,402 housings launched in 2011.

Certainly, good housing strengthens communities and provides a better setting in which to raise families. It improves health, educational achievement and employment opportunities and provides a long-term asset to be passed on the future generations. In order to ensure a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come, it is necessary to renew with larger socials problematic such as to accommodate the population.

But if the territory is a composition that results from strategies of actors, it doesn't stay nevertheless a space socially constructed. Elementary form of territory, housing crystallizes stakes and institutes itself as basis of every projection towards the future. It becomes the object of action of a multiplicity of actors and the topic of different strategies, it is considered under the angle of its materiality and laws that govern it. However, housing is not only a material data. It is constructed by the practices and the representations of individuals. This privileged place of living in which people represent themselves, construct their setting of life, indicates the codes of the society to which they belong, from where the importance of the individual, of the subjectivity, of representations, in every housing analysis. The survey of
the new built environment in Algiers and particularly the new city of Zerhouni, a representative example concerning the housing projects realized in Algeria, will demonstrate the existence of a particular context and the necessity of a set of principles for building the basis of a sustainable built environment.

**Beyond the housing projects, creating a viable built environment: case of Zerhouni city in Algiers**

These last years, Zerhouni city involved a major transfer of the population guaranteeing everyone the right to a home in optimal living conditions. The city of Zerhouni (called Les Bananiers, otherwise said, Banana trees) is situated in the commune of Mohammadia in the nearest periphery of Algiers and symbolizes a residential zone par excellence. Indeed, Zerhouni city corresponded to a big place of accommodation with rental public housings, social-participative housings, promotional housings and especially renting-sale housings realized by the Housing Improvement and Development Agency (AADL). The agricultural vocation has been completely changed in aid of different housing projects.

**Housing production and inhabitants’ comfort**

To build blocks of flats is, for the Algerian decision-makers, a good answer to housing shortage, despite the fact that the inhabitants denounce the formal and architectural poverty of these innumerable buildings of concrete. In Algeria, it appears difficult to escape a repetitive architecture, considering the rigorousness of the economic system of the construction and the constraints due to the prefabrication process. Certainly, housing being above all an object defined by its spatial dimension, it is characterized by three attributes: the metrics, the scale and the substance. Nevertheless, housing constitutes also the concrete matter of the social space and contains the material contexts of the social life.

The treated sample (100 people constituting a representative sample of the inhabitants) is not stratified rigorously, nor completely random. The people were interrogated because of their inscription in the considered spaces and their availability, first condition of the exchange. Let’s underline that all the persons that we interrogated lived in Zerhouni city since a few years. Above all qualitative, the committed survey justifies well that it is less the static representativeness and the mathematical rigor that prevail than the capacity to seize the problems that inhabitants meet as individuals and as community in their new built environment. However, the distortions of the sample owed to absences or refusals are frequent. Cases of non answers can also depend on the asked questions, of the implication level of the interrogated people and of their socio-cultural features. The results have been interpreted while using the software Sphinx version5.

In our investigation, 70% of the interrogated inhabitants were tenants and 30% owners of their housing. A big majority of the investigated find their housing suitable (70% of the investigated) or even agreeable (65% of the investigated). Therefore, only 35% of the investigated find their housing disagreeable and only 30% find it narrow. However, the
inhabitants delighted, in a first time, to find in these apartments modern comfort of which they had been deprived until then, mentioned subsequently problems of bad workmanship, not waterproof roofs and bad plumbing. This kind of problems comes back constantly to the centre of proceedings. This fact reflects the state of emergency of construction operations and of assignment of housings.

Indeed, Zerhouni city has been achieved gradually following a general plan, in order to realize a coherent assemblage of different types of architecture and dwellings. Urban planners thought that a satisfactory life quality got itself thanks to a strong population density, solely capable of guaranteeing services, transportation and animation of the district. Therefore, the will to arouse a feeling of city, to create an animation, results in invariable characteristics: the high density of housings, the presence of facilities; the whole lot connected by public transportation. But today, as the city tries to define its role, it undergoes periodic adjustments. Did the local authorities ensure a balanced situation on the social as well as the economic plan by realizing close to those residential spaces public facilities and transport services?

**Facilities offer and inhabitants’ practices**

The residential life, work, purchases, leisure and activities take place henceforth in separated places, within agglomerations always more vast. If this picture is also worth for Algiers and its suburban areas, the more active families disperse themselves daily between different places. To satisfy the basic needs of the inhabitants of Zerhouni city and to achieve a better quality of life in this new built environment, planners put in service scholar facilities since the arrival of the first inhabitants. These last, find close to them, primary schools, colleges and trades of first necessity. While moving a little away, they reach high schools. By bus, they can join the banks, the universities and the hospitals. It was the diagram that prevailed in the entire city.

Nonetheless, this fact doesn't prevent the investigated to mention the lack of life. Indeed, the interrogated find their new district un-lively and monotonous (60% of the investigated), and 69% of the investigated don’t like the city. For these inhabitants, to lodge is necessary, but not sufficient. Around that, they expect to find a district, with its exchanges, a city full of life. According to the interviewed – the identity of the interviewed will not be unveiled in this paper, anonymity being thus respected – what was missing lies in: «places of meetings and exchanges, crowded day and night […], places edged with boutiques […], a market where to go shopping».

Today, taking into consideration the social disparities and lifestyles, makes feel itself more and more. The worry of the proximity of trades, for example, is raised by the modest populations, in particular by the non-motorized people. The supplying of appropriate public services implied a great concern too. The absence of a local post office, for instance, is not practical for retired people who are obliged to go at least 10 kilometres away to get their pays. Is the new built environment badly connected with good transport services linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services?
Transportation means and inhabitants’ interests

In Zerhouni city, the transport system suffered from overcrowding, congestion, delays, pollution and everyone could easily observe a predominance of individual vehicles demonstrating a lack of choice over how to travel. The planning operations were put back notably because they granted the collective space a unique vocation: the automobile circulation. The inhabitants needed a step change in transport planning in order to deliver a system which meets the needs of all of them, because that one does want it or not, a good transport system is essential both for a strong economy and a better quality of life.

Today, a new line of Tramway links this city to the downtown of Algiers and also to the nearest communes: A first section of 7.2 Km in lengths linking Bordj El Kiffan commune to Zerhouni city (both situated in the Eastern part of Algiers) has been put in service on the 8th of May 2011. It has been extended with 9 other kilometres to "The Executed by firing squad" Multimodal Station in the downtown area this time. This second section has been put in service on the 15th of June 2012, offering principally an interconnection with the subway. In total, the tramway line spreads actually over 16.2 Km with 28 stations. A third section from Borj El Kiffan commune towards Dergana commune (always in the Eastern part of Algiers) is currently under construction and will be opened soon.

For the inhabitants, the displacements to Algiers are indispensable for reasons as working, shopping or visiting family, but the observation of the places which are frequented for other reasons demonstrates that it is never very distant from the district of origin. Actually, the frequent round trips between the previous and the actual place of residence don't permit to speak about two distinct territories. On the one hand, in the time, since one corresponds to the past, bygone, and the other to the present and to the future, and on the other hand, in the space, seeing that to each one correspond representations and practices spatially determined. Does this change of district imply a change in lifestyles or community behaviours?

Setting of life and inhabitants’ safety

Rehoused by the local authorities, some inhabitants are from the central districts of Algiers as well as from its shanty towns. For a lot of households, these districts are the places of their installation since their arrival to Algiers. The residential transfer to Zerhouni city provokes material and symbolic effects. For the inhabitants, the modification of the territorial system consists of a new type of housing (apartments in towers or bars), a new lifestyle, a new spatial configuration of the private space, a new use of the public space, without forgetting the new geographical situation, which implies some new norms to fit. While observing the inhabitants of Zerhouni city and what they had converging, while admitting their oddness appeared "common features" like the installation in the city, the learning and the experimentation of the new housing, but again and especially the residential stability in Algiers, from where the importance of the opinion of these persons.
According to the investigation, 77% of the interrogated inhabitants find Zerhouni city troubling. According to the interviewed coming from the medina: «The city is worrying […] the strong presence of people coming from shantytowns justifies this judgment». Indeed, this population is judged socially «undesirable» and the local authorities must be attentive to the evolution of this hostile attitude towards poorest inhabitants. Moreover, the observation of the extra-curricular activities in Zerhouni city, demonstrates that children and teenagers remain near to their building or go to playgrounds. According to the interviewed, what was missing lies in: «sports rooms opened till late […] a garden where to stroll or to eat lunch, well planted trees, correctly fixed lamps, all that has been neglected, from where the necessity of qualitative interventions in order to improve the well-being in Zerhouni city».

Let’s underline that public spaces constitute a permanent element of the urban environment, at the same time for inhabitants and passers-by. Inhabitants spread around their housing, they refer to the district, pay a particular attention to streets, places, centres and settings of their daily life. Therefore, a reflection on the space must facilitate the establishment of social relations between inhabitants and also of neighbourhood.

In Zerhouni city, the built homogeneity is defined by its identical blocks signalling paradoxically who lives there and why, and unveiling the social group heterogeneity. Creating buildings and urban environment that people enjoy living in and working in requires therefore, best practices at the same time economic, social and environmental. Building and strengthening a sustainable community imposes as well, to improve the quality of life of the population and to consider the longer term implications of decisions.

«The possibility to identify us positively to a place […] to develop the pride to live in», this is the essential stake for the new residents. Indeed, beyond the simple addition of housing, of services, of streets, the city defines itself by its character and its quality, the animation, life that results from the combination of all these elements. Currently, the space inhabited also represented and lived, namely Zerhouni city, defines itself from its social actors, their representations, their behaviours and their practices. Certainly, the identity forms the major tie between the human beings and their setting of life. It is a powerful motor of social production. Nevertheless, that appropriation process deserves to be shaded. The experimentation of this new built environment imply, according to the inhabitants, some new attitudes, some new behaviours to adopt.

Conclusion

The reflection on the new built environment in Algiers leads to the definition of the pros and cons, to a hold of position towards these big housing programs and the challenge that they raised. For the present as for the future, the local authorities must learn to put the inhabitants first, not fees or speed of construction, while going beyond the simple information of the population, while accepting to approach "topics that annoy", while admitting the contradiction and while accepting to be disavowed sometimes, because that they do want it or not, the
adherence of citizens to projects that concern them is, in the present context, the key of a sustainable built environment.

The analysis of our investigations and interviews indicates that the representations of the residential spaces of the inhabitants depend closely on their experience at the same time personal, social and spatial. Consequently, constrained by inhabitants’ attitudes, housing projects cannot conceive themselves outside of their context and must define themselves according to the will of the local actors and their prerogatives certainly, but also and especially according to the inhabitants needs.

Today, for a sustainable built environment, a broad view of inhabitants’ welfare is necessary, a long term perspective about the consequences of today's actions of the Algerian decision-makers is required and the full involvement of civil society to reach viable solutions is becoming more than ever imperative. That’s why all citizen participation must be significant, committed and constructive.

References


