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Neo-colonialism or Gentrification in the Medina of Marrakesh

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Morocco

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At the beginning of the 21st century, the Medina of Marrakesh is facing significant changes. The old town had been isolated and preserved by the French protectorate policy during the first half of the 1900s. After the withdrawal of the colonial power, the former incarnation of Muslim cultural life declined to a residential area for the poorest rural population.

During the sixties, individual members of a growing gay community settled Marrakesh. In the 1980s, UNESCO acknowledged the exotic attractiveness and the cultural significance of the 'oriental Medina' of Marrakesh by including the town in the world's cultural heritage programme, and the characteristics of the Medina also attract the international mass tourism today. Helped by the structural condition of globalization, numerous western foreigners had moved into the old town by the end of the 20th century. All forms of media, first and foremost the Internet, offer real estate for rent and for sale in many quarters of the old part of Marrakesh. In the Medina, the growing group of western foreigners live excessively on a grand scale together with the increasingly impoverished Moroccans. Does all this speak for symptoms of neo-colonialism? Or, due to the fact that well-off foreigners contribute to the renovation and preservation of the fabric of the buildings, does it rather indicate gentrification?

20th-century town planning

The policy of Governor Lyautey and his chief architect Prost during the time of the protectorate helped to spatially isolate the old towns of Morocco, including the Medina of Marrakesh, from modern town expansions as well as to preserve the fabric of the buildings. This did not only include the preservation and protection of the historic old towns, but also the building of modern 'European' towns, so-called *villes nouvelles*, at a distance from the old towns.

After the end of the French protectorate in 1956, the Moroccan upper and middle class left the old town, and a poor rural population spread into the Medina. By the 60s,

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international tourism had already discovered the old towns along with all other old cities of cultural interest in the world. UNESCO took the cultural significance of the Medina into account by including it into the world's cultural heritage programme in 1985. However, the town-planning restoration measures were restricted at first to individual buildings and to the paving of the most important streets of the old town.

Western foreigners in the Medina of Marrakesh

During the 60s and 70s, the process of decolonization took place comparatively peacefully in Morocco. Foreign real estate property was not expropriated. This led to individual western foreigners settling in the Medina of Marrakesh already in the early 60s, when one could still find the French population of the protectorate in the *villes nouvelles*. That would not have been possible during the time of the French protectorate because of urban apartheid. Many of these foreigners were artists and architects 'looking for the Orient' and/or looking to 'find themselves'. An international gay community was established, which functioned as the initiator for the massive influx of western foreigners at the end of the 20th century.

A fascination with the oriental aura, the colours, the fragrances, the year-round warm climate, the reasonable cost of living, and expectations of Dionysiac joys contributed to the expansion of the community. By the mid-80s, the number of western foreigners in the Medina had risen to several dozen, but it remained a manageable quantity. By the mid-90s, Europeans had become increasingly interested in buying houses in the old town. At this time, the first inns (*maison d'hôtes*) and several exclusive restaurants were built. During the final years of the 20th century, the real estate business boomed in the old town. The demand for real estate has especially exploded in the last two years, and supply has been extended.

In September 1999, western foreigners lived in approximately 150 *riyāds*. Most preferred were accommodations which stood out for their not yet completely dilapidated fabric, close proximity to the Jemaa el-Fna, and easy accessibility by car.

In contrast to previous years, last year's buyers no longer mainly came from the upper class or the artist scene, but rather from the broad middle class of Europe. There is a wide variety of newcomers, from immigrants and transmigrants, to bourgeoisie and illustrious holiday guests, to European Muslims.

Many buy *riyāds* in Marrakesh because of the comparatively low cost – with respect to European prices. However, not only the purchase price is decisive: the standard of living in general has improved. In Marrakesh, a house with an inner courtyard and employed servants is affordable for many.

Other equally important arguments are individuality and independence, which one can express and enjoy behind the closed walls one's own house. The *riyād* is considered a symbol of freedom by both temporary and permanent immigrants. Europeans are still attracted by a world which seems strange and mystical to them, and which may evoke sentiments of being a colonialist amidst the omnipresent poverty of the Moroccans.

Hollywood films, TV reports, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet add to the subjective conveying of information about the Medina of Marrakesh and to the promotion of living in a *riyād*. Currently, architects and real estate agents are offering hundreds of *riyāds* on the market. French Moroccan estate agents pursue aggressive marketing strategies, which range from face to face contact on the Jemaa el-Fna to interactive communication on the Internet. Western foreigners also buy in other old towns of Morocco, such as Essaouira and Asilah.

Gentrification vs. neo-colonialism

The prominent American architect Bill Willis, who has been living in a former palace in the north of the Medina since the 60s, formulates the arguments brought into discussion on the presence of western foreigners in the old town of Marrakesh by the new inhabitants: 'It's very good for the Medina because these foreigners are bringing in a lot of money and are fixing up all these old houses that are falling into ruins [...] or are tearing them down and are building something marvelous in the place [...], so that's very good. [...] It cleans up the city. It brings a lot of money to Morocco. It employs hundreds of Moroccan workmen, and so that part is very, very good'. These observations cannot be contradicted if one applies them exclusively to the fabric of the buildings and to the financial input. Similar to the economically and socially declined districts of industrial countries, those districts of Morocco which seem to be left to fall into socio-economic ruin are structurally saved and revalued by the wealthy population. In addition, another way of life is being established in the district: gentrification in the 'oriental town' – indeed in the 'oriental town' because the houses, apart from some exceptions, are designed in the 'oriental' style that shaped the image 19th-century Europe had of the Orient. Thus, a hybrid area was created with an imaginary oriental ambience and a sumptuous way of life, which consciously contrasted the poverty of the neighbourhoods. This contrast, which is manifest especially in the availability of servants in houses, hotels, and restaurants, adds to the fact that western foreigners feel they live in a 'sort of gracious colonial atmosphere', as Mr Willis says.

Depending on what perspective is taken, the process of change in the Medina of Marrakesh either proves to be gentrification,

which is evaluated positively because it helps preserve the precious fabric of the buildings rich in tradition, or it represents neo-colonialism, which uses the product of Islamic culture to meet the expectations of the European settlers. One should recall in this context the origin of the imagination 'Orient', as Mary Anne Stevens² outlines: 'Between 1798 and 1914, North Africa and the Near East, as a closest non-Christian region to Europe, exercised a fascination upon the West, which responded in a variety of ways: the scholarly study of ancient civilisations and of contemporary cultures, imaginary evocations in poems and novels, literary descriptions and tourists' enthusiasms, as well as representations by artists.' More than a hundred years after the Europeans created the image of the 'Orient', they now once and for all (peacefully) start to redesign their 'Orient', i.e. the old towns of Morocco, structurally and ideologically according to their imagination. They do that from the inside, where the Islamic urban way of life, the *um-rân hadarî*, is rooted. ◆

View of an inner courtyard and a roof garden with swimming pool of an old town house renovated by a European.



PHOTO: SANDRA PETERMANN

Notes

1. The ordinary house with an inner courtyard in the Moroccan town is called *dar*. The central element is the inner courtyard surrounded by a colonnade, at which rooms facing each other are located. In the corners are usually an entrance, a kitchen, and a stairwell with a bathroom. In Morocco *riyād* stands for a special form of a house with a garden. The basic type has residential buildings on the shorter sides that face each other. The other sides display high boundary walls. In today's Marrakesh every residential house is called *riyād* in colloquial context with foreigners.
2. Stevens, Mary Anne (1984). 'Western Art and its Encounter with the Islamic World 1798-1914'. In *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse. European Painters in North Africa and the Near East*, Mary Anne Stevens. London: Royal Academy of Arts, pp. 15-23.

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