

Chapter 3

Street Vending in Downtown Rabat: In Resistance to Imported Urban Models



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Abstract In recent years street vending has become a major feature of the public space in downtown Rabat, Morocco’s capital city. Home to the Parliament and governmental institutions, downtown Rabat holds a powerful political symbolism in the collective representation of its inhabitants. Street vending is thus considered an intruder activity that must be banned from the area. However, history describes the downtown as a commercial zone where open-air markets—called *Souks*—were held regularly alongside brick-and-mortar shops before the advent of The French Protectorate in 1912, which transformed it into a “European zone” with a new “modern-formal” economy, pushing the local population to dwell in informal settlements and live from informal economy on the outskirts of the city. Through a historical analysis of the evolution of the downtown’s public space use induced by the French urban laws and models, and perpetuated by the Moroccan policies after independence, this chapter argues that itinerant trade belongs to the downtown as a central function and key element of its urban dynamics that has been disrupted by alien policies. This study makes an original contribution by evaluating the impact of colonial urban policies on urban informality in the Moroccan context. Results suggest that street vending, now considered as misappropriation of space by authorities, could be considered as a form of resistance to imported planning models and that efficient urban interventions depend on an in-depth understanding of rooted local urban design.

Keywords Street Vending · Urban Informality · *Souks*

3.1 Introduction

Urban informality is the most dominant form of urbanisation globally. Whether in the field of informal housing or informal economy, numbers continue growing exponentially. By 2050, for instance, experts predict that up to three billion people on earth will live in informal urban environments (Samper et al. 2020). The informal

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sector, for its part, provides more than 70% of total employment—and nearly one-third of GDP—in emerging markets and developing economies,¹ according to a recent study by the World Bank. Morocco falls right into these estimations with the informal economy representing 70% of employment and 30% of GDP (Lahlou et al. 2020).

The debate around the informal economy originated from the field of economics (Charmes 2012). The optimism of the modernisation theory led scholars in the 1950s and 1960s to believe that undeclared jobs in developing countries were part of a transitional phase and that wage-earning activities would eventually absorb the labour force. The problem was reduced to a cultural backwardness in comparison to the North. This optimism soon proved to be unfounded. Investigations showed that what was then called the traditional sector had not only persisted but had expanded to encompass new territories, as Hans Singer notes in his Kenya Report for the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1970. Scholars started then to admit that this sector was destined to last, and began using the term “informal sector”, coined by the British anthropologist Keith Hart in a study on Ghana in 1971, and adopted by the ILO in a study on Kenya in 1972.

Since then, debate around informal economy waxed and waned, but in recent decades, renewed interest has developed in the informal economy worldwide, both on scholarly and institutional levels. Today, “the informal economy is a field of study in its own right, drawing an increasing number of scholars from multiple disciplines ranging from economics, anthropology, and industrial relations to gender studies, political science, sociology, and urban planning” (Chen 2012). “There is also a flurry of high-profile policies being pursued by international agencies and Third World city governments to manage informality” (Roy 2005).

Urban studies focus on the spatial implications of informal economy with an emphasis on street vending as one of the largest and most visible sub-groups of the informal economy, with the most noticeable impact on the city. The planning literature that discusses the street vending topic is basically composed of a plethora of empirical analyses conducted in several countries in Africa (Akiyode 2017; Hlengwa 2016; Mitullah 2003), Asia (Kim and Labbé 2016; Meissonnier 2010; Bhowmik 2005) and Latin America (de Fatima Gomes and Réginensi 2007). They have diverse conceptual starting points and objects of analysis when summarising (non-exhaustively) the main topics that have been raised in the planning literature tackling informal economy, as Duminy explains in his paper elaborated for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). He affirms that one of the most popular themes in recent scholarship is the analysis of power and resistance in urban space in reference to the conflict over public space and the confrontation between urban formal policies and the street traders’ responses (Middleton 2003; Donovan 2008; Bromley and Mackie 2008).

However, the idea of resistance discussed in this chapter is not meant in the usual sense of street vendors covert and overt actions in response to authorities’

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/11/widespread-informality-likely-to-slow-recovery-from-covid-19-in-developing-economies>.

regulations and evictions (Hermawati et al. 2018), but is mentioned to highlight the way the itinerant trade spontaneously stood up to the test of time, especially in the geographic context of Morocco's capital, which called for the historic evolution of the activity. While laborious work has been conducted to track the evolution of informal settlements as a major aspect of urban informality (Samper et al. 2020), the evolution of street vending in a given area during a specific period of time is conventionally one of the hardest aspects to study due to its inconsistency and volatility over time.

Street vending is omnipresent in all Moroccan cities (HCP 2014), but the number of vendors and the impact of their activity on the public space differ from one city to another, and sometimes from one district to another within the same city. In Rabat, because of tight regulations, the downtown area has been an area inaccessible to street vendors for decades. These regulations that exist elsewhere but are stricter downtown, are due to the importance of the flow of traffic that operates there, but also to its proximity to the facilities and institutions that represent the central political power, namely: the Royal Palace, the Parliament, Ministry headquarters, Bank of Maghreb, and the Central Post Office. The downtown area, therefore, takes on a particular symbolism among users and decision-makers, to whom this space is tantamount to modernity and prestige, and where an activity such as itinerant trade, considered anarchic and illegal, as described in the media, cannot exist. Thus, the authorities intervene with successive eviction operations.

However, going back to the ancient history of the city of Rabat, its downtown and the evolution of its urban space and the practices that took place there, it emerges that itinerant trade has been a common practice in Rabat for centuries, under the name of *Souk*, the Arab word for marketplace.

Souk are at the heart of the traditional urban culture in Arab-Islamic societies (Zafirah 2018). They are one of the city's dominant features and are intimately associated to its development, its urban organisation, and its architecture (Awad 1989). *Souks* have been subject to multiple descriptive studies as a unique urban form with impactful social implications (Zafirah 2018; Hmood 2017; Mermier 2005; Awad 1989).

In the Moroccan context, the study of these marketplaces can be traced back to the French pre-colonial literature as intriguing spaces playing central roles in the daily political, economic, and social life of Morocco. (Kninah 2016).

In fact, much of the history of modern urban development in African countries is considered to be closely linked to the colonial era (Freund 2007; Njoh 1997; Mabogunje 1990; Santos 1975). Urban informality in the Global South, for instance, is believed to be one of the results of colonial policies (Kita and Okyere 2015; Santos 1975).

With the establishment of the protectorate over Morocco and the arrival of new French models of urban planning at the dawn of the twentieth century, the activity of these *souks* began to change in urban areas. Nevertheless, scholarly interest in *souks* did not wane, even after the independence, as extensive studies aimed to detail the urban and architectural organisation of *souks* (Troin 1975) in what has been described as a decisive progress in the related knowledge (Fay 1977). Other studies focused

on the evolution of the traditional functions of *souks* (Ponasik 1963) and the spatial changes they have been through in modern times (Kania and Kałaska 2019).

Today we speak of street vending and *souks* as completely distinct activities. In fact, the literature does not mention a link between the *souks* and street vendors, at least in the Moroccan context. Through an analysis of the evolution of Rabat's urban space, we argue in this chapter that street vending is a mutated form of the ancestral *souks* that have been altered over time due to the succession of alien policies that overlooked this essential component of local life.

3.1.1 *Study Area*

The choice of Rabat to serve as a case study for this chapter was not accidental, yet it seemed to be a natural option. To elaborate a spatio-temporal analysis of the evolution of itinerant trade in the Moroccan context under the influence of imported urban policies, we looked for a city where urban transformations induced by the French Protectorate would be visible and could be tracked. Rabat was carefully chosen by the French administration to become the new capital, which meant that it was the first city to receive a special urban treatment. Indeed, the first urban policies and regulations developed theoretically in France were applied in Rabat, marking, thus, a neat and visible rupture with the existing urban reality and the start of a new urban era. Considering its status, Rabat developed a specific historic and political symbolism that led to its sacralisation in the collective imagination of its users and policy makers that shadowed its urban history before the protectorate.

Also, despite the lack of data about the evolution of Rabat's *souks* over time, there is an abundance of documentation, and especially city master plans (Basset 1989) from the beginning of the twentieth century until today that facilitate the spatio-temporal analysis we aim to explore of the links between the ancient and current itinerant trading traditions.

3.1.2 *Research Materials and Method*

To understand the process of Rabat's spatial evolution over time and then that of itinerant trade it was essential to overlap bibliographic, photographic, and cartographic evidence to extract targeted data and explore the underlying correlations.

Since our research deals with a known outcome, that of the proliferation of street vending in downtown Rabat, this chapter uses a retrospective analysis of the spatio-temporal changes that Rabat's *souks* have undergone before, during, and after the protectorate, to emphasise potential links between the itinerant activity both in its ancestral and current form.

3.2 *Souks of Rabat Before the French Protectorate*

3.2.1 *Rabat's Urban Configuration Before the Protectorate*

Before the arrival of the first French settlers in 1912, Rabat was a small and quiet city composed of two main urban centres: the Oudaïas *kasbah*,² a former fortified camp dating from the ninth century located at the mouth of the Bou-Regreg river, and the *medina*³ confined in its Andalusian enclosure dating from the seventeenth century. Outside of this enclosure, a few monuments punctuated the landscape: the ruins of the Hassan Mosque, the Es-Sunna Mosque, the imperial palace built in the eighteenth century, and its gardens. These elements were delimited by a second enclosure built in the twelfth century by the Almohads. Beyond these external ramparts, rose a belvedere on the valley of Bou-Regreg, the ruins of Chellah, the old Marinid necropolis of the thirteenth century. Gardens, vineyards, and orange groves occupied the remaining space between the outer and inner walls, which surrounded the *medina* (Bennani 2012). The doors of the different enclosures were connected to those of the imperial palace, to Es-Sunna Mosque and to the Hassan tower via many paths (Chorfi 2003).

3.2.2 *Rabat's Souk Before the Protectorate*

Even though the term “informal economy” did not exist before 1975, historical evidence shows that the concept of self-subsistence economy existed centuries before in Morocco regardless of its denomination and juridical status evolution. “*Souks*” are one of the most prominent manifestations of this economy (Ponasik 1963). *Souk* is the Arab word for market; it refers to both the ephemeral open-air markets held on a regular basis, often weekly in the countryside, and the covered *bazaars* built within the ramparts of the *medinas*.

Troin (1975) suggests that *souks* are the result of the historical evolution of the activities of peddlers, whose movements progressively changed until they started gathering in fairgrounds either in rural or urban areas on fixed dates. Peddling itself is so old that it is hardly possible to trace it back in time. In the sixteenth century, Leon the African⁴ spoke of it as an already ancient and well-established activity when describing the merchant caravans of Fez travelling from one market to another.

² Fortified citadel in North African cities.

³ Ancient quarter of North African cities, usually.

⁴ Joannes Leo Africanus (/ æfrɪˈkeɪnəs/; born al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Fasi, Arabic: حسن ابن محمد الوزان الفاسي c. 1554) was a–c. 1494; Berber Andalusian diplomat and author who is best known for his book *Descrittione dell’Africa* (*Description of Africa*) centred on the geography of the Maghreb and Nile Valley. The book was regarded among his scholarly peers in Europe as the most authoritative treatise on the subject until the modern exploration of Africa. For this work, Leo became a household name among European geographers.



Fig. 3.1 Rabat's commercial strips and open-air *souks*

Like all imperial cities of Morocco,⁵ Rabat's *medina* encompasses a large *souk* within its enclosure, which constitutes an intrinsic component of its social and economic life. Spatially, the *souk* comes in the form of commercial strips built around the main central mosque; their initial function has continued until today. This spatial configuration is common to all Moroccan *medinas* and is seen extensively in all Islamic cities of the past, with the exception of rare cases that present different urban forms linked to Islamic takeovers of classically planned cities or European colonial interventions (Correia and Taher 2015).

Besides the intramural *souk* of the *medina*, open-air market *souks* used to be held regularly outside of the *medina*'s ramparts several years before the protectorate. These markets are showcased clearly in old photographs and postcards of Rabat taken during the French Protectorate, which proves they were still functional at least during the first decade of this period. The following map tentatively aims to situate the location of the *souks* based on the aforementioned photographic evidence to achieve our research goal. While it cannot be exactly dated, the restitution roughly represents the first decade of the protectorate. This map seeks to provide a better grasp of the urban implications of the said open-air markets and serve the spatio-temporal analysis described as the methodology adopted for this chapter (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

⁵ The imperial cities of Morocco are the four historical capital cities of Morocco: Fez, Marrakesh, Meknes, and Rabat.



Fig. 3.2 Old photographs and postal cards of Rabat's open-air market during the first decade of the French Protectorate. 1. Souk El Had 2. El Ouassaa 9. Souk Leghzal (*Source* Unknown photographers, 1. 1917, 2. 1910, 3. 1910)

The *raison d'être* of these open-air markets can be deduced from the analysis made by Ponasik⁶ who relates in her work the changes in the functions of the Moroccan *souks* over time. Initially, this type of market was exclusive to the countryside; it filled fundamental political, economic, and social functions and obeyed a specific geographical distribution; the products sold were local and the exchange mode was barter. The gradual opening of the European market starting from the second half of the nineteenth century induced major changes to the structure of the *souks*, the products, and the movement of the merchants. An export–import dynamic flourished and completely reversed the economic structure of the countryside. The exchange became monetary and peasants became dependent on products they could not produce themselves; the main direct consequence of this new economic reality: the increase of peddlers and retailers. *Souaka* (merchants of *souks* in the local dialect) started looking for new markets in neighbouring towns and in this way assured the distribution of rural products in urban areas. This explanation correlates with the nature of the products sold at the doors of Rabat's ramparts (livestock, rural products) and shows the origin of the activity of its *souks* (Fig. 3.1). At the beginning of the twentieth century, *souks* around the country will witness new changes due to the establishment of the French Protectorate. The French administration will actually heavily rely on them to collect taxes, organise census, and control the population overall. To better manage their activities, walls were erected to surround *souks*, which encompassed built shops, dispensaries, offices of authorities, and usually a school, thus introducing urban forms into the countryside. Later on, many of them evolved into cities.

However, this was not the destiny of Rabat's open-air markets. While specific dates of their complete disappearance could not be found, it is safe to say that their life story is closely linked to the urban transformation that Rabat underwent under the French command and later under the Moroccan urban policies after independence.

⁶ Diane Skelly Ponasik was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco in the 1960s and has a Ph.D. in Anthropology with an emphasis on peasants of the Middle East. She spent ten years on and off in Morocco and then joined the United States Agency for International Development. During her twenty-seven-year career she was stationed in the Yemen Arab Republic, Mali, Egypt, Haiti, and Macedonia. She is now retired and lives with her husband in Washington, DC.

3.3 Urban Transformation of Rabat and Its Impact on *Souks*' Activity

3.3.1 *Urban Transformation of Rabat*

For Lyautey, the French army general designated to be the first Resident General to head the colonial administration, building a new modern capital that would mark the French colonial supremacy was almost a gesture of war (Bennani 2012). To achieve his urbanistic vision, he sought advice at the Social Museum in France that was militating to implement master plans for French cities.⁷ It was at this time that Forestier, a French landscape architect, suggested to Lyautey to experiment on major Moroccan imperial cities with his “park system”, a concept that he coined in 1906. Subsequently Prost, a French architect, was hired to transform Lyautey and Forestier’s recommendations into an actual plan for the new capital Rabat. The principles were clear: separating the European zone from the indigenous zone, creating a clear zoning plan, protecting the *medina*’s architecture, surrounding it with a *non aedificandi* zone for hygienic and military purposes, and articulating the city around a hierarchical and continuous network of open spaces, ranging from public gardens to peri-urban green belts.

Firstly, a traffic circulation plan was designed based on the existing paths that connected the *medina* to the existing political and cult facilities, namely the Royal Palace and the Es-Sunna Mosque. Along these paths, Prost drew wide roads dotted with new facilities emphasising the colonial power, namely the Parliament, the central bank, and postal services. The conversion of the same original tracks into structured roads facilitated the psychological and spatial implementation of the European city by investing the mental map of flow movements used by the local population (Basset 1989). In addition, a new tunnel allowed the construction of a railway station, and a national road crossed the city transforming it into a major transit point between the north and the south of the country (Fig. 3.3).

Special attention was given to landscape by elaborating a plan of open spaces that reproduced the elements of the park system concept sketched out by Forestier. Thus, as the latter had recommended, public parks, gardens, and open spaces were to be created inside and outside the Almohad enclosure before the neighbourhoods began to rise (Bennani 2012).

Then Prost drew up a zoning plan in which every part of the city was given a specific function while ensuring the complete separation between Moroccan and European zones. Besides the conservation of the *medina*, the separation between the two zones aimed to facilitate the control of the local population in case of riots and to protect the Europeans from potential epidemic risks. Thus, the *medina* was contained in its ramparts and prevented from growing naturally, to prove, in a way, the superiority of the western cultural values in terms of modern urban planning. In

⁷ The first city master plan was completed in 1919. Morocco served as a laboratory to experiment with French theories of urbanism.

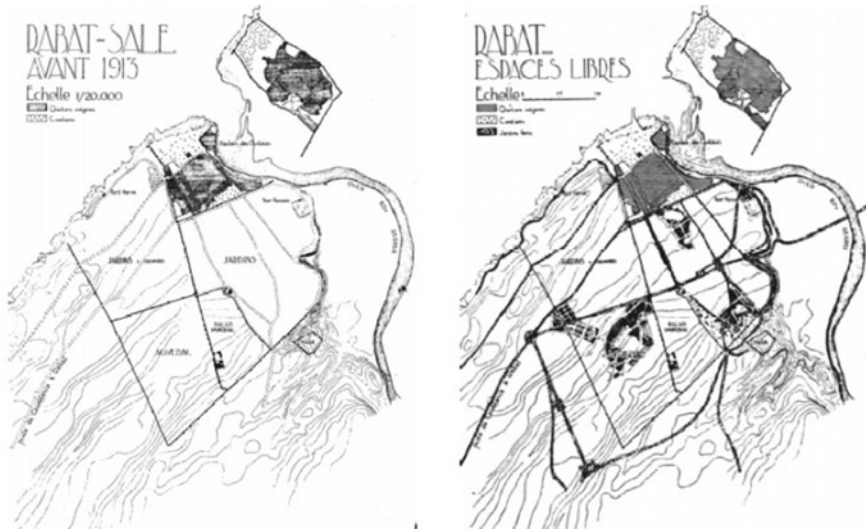


Fig. 3.3 Left: Master plan of Rabat Salé 1913 (Fonds Prost, IFA Paris). Right: Master plan of open spaces designed by Prost 1915 (Source *L'Urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux*, tome 1, 1932)

some references of colonial literature, the *medina* was described as tantamount to an anarchic, repetitive, and confusing space lacking logic, versus the European city that represented clarity and rationality (Mahé 1936). Except for a new small neighbourhood built for Moroccan employees, the new Rabat was completely reserved for the Europeans. In fact, Rabat's master plan was designed as if the indigenous population was stable and never going to grow (Basset 1989).

Considering this new urban configuration, the initial nucleus that formed the entire city of Rabat in previous centuries turned into the downtown area for the expanding city. Downtown Rabat was intended for residential and commercial functions and became a hub where French white-collar workers, other European blue-collar workers and Moroccans met, and the rest of the city evolved around it. Its main axis began developing in the 1920s on both sides of the route leading to the Royal Palace and the Es-sunna Mosque, on the one hand, and to the Résidence Générale (Resident Général's House) on the other. With its institutional amenities, three to five storey buildings, arcade galleries, and architectural uniqueness, downtown represented a distinguished part of the city.

3.3.2 *Socio-economic Changes Under the Protectorate: Genesis of Urban Informality*

Urban systems and cities change and develop under the impetus of various political, economic, social, and spatial factors, regardless of the geographic context. In the underdeveloped countries, exogenous interests occurring often on a global scale primarily affect the configuration of spaces and territories (Santos 1975). In Morocco, the vicissitudes that characterised its urban space and thus urban planning history were triggered by colonisation, and perpetuated by elitist policies after independence (Basset 1989).

When the French Protectorate came into force effectively in 1912, a major decision was made to transfer the capital city from Fez to Rabat. This significant move, motivated by French interests only, represents a turning point in Morocco's territorial organisation. In fact, shifting the political and economic centre of gravity from the centre of the country to its Atlantic seaboard resulted in an unprecedented rural exodus towards the coastal cities that benefited from the technological and technical progress introduced by France (Basset 1989).

These coastal cities continue to form the most important and highly active axis of the country today. At the centre of this axis, Rabat, a small and neatly limited city until the beginning of the twentieth century, on abruptly becoming the capital of the "Modern Morocco", will witness a demographic explosion and burst outside of its ramparts, pulling its neighbouring city Salé in its wake. Furthermore, the pressure generated by this sudden demographic growth will be accentuated by the segregative planning policies established by Lyautey, leading, over time, to a fragmented urban space.

Passionate about urban planning, Lyautey will rely upon it as much as he would on military mastery (Laprade 1932) and will personally engage in the creation of Rabat's novel city plan. Not altering the charm of the *medina* and building the European zone right around it was his leitmotiv to his team. Although this laudable directive saved the architectural integrity of the *medina* until today, Prost, the French architect and town planner hired to lead this mission revealed the less glorious agenda behind Lyautey's guidelines: to assure the complete separation between the European and indigenous zones for political, economic, health, and aesthetic reasons.

The Moroccan citizen then found himself confronted with a new reality where he no longer occupied the central place in the local policies. Access to goods, services, and urban space started following a new hierarchy that led to the emergence of an entire Moroccan city on the outskirts of the European city, lacking the most elementary regulations of hygiene, town planning, equipment, and construction (Dethier 1970). The exclusion from the centre of the city, the so-called European zone, drove the local population to seek places to dwell in the suburbs that were not subject to the regulations introduced by the colonial administration, thereby losing the right to their own city.

This exclusion was not by mere recklessness but was in fact the reflexion of the indirect rule "by which the 'natives' were encouraged to rule themselves along

‘traditional’ lines, making administration cheaper and easier (and obviating claims towards membership in the emerging colonial society) while dynamic colonial society expanded freely” as Wright (1987) cited by Freund (2007) argues.

In addition to the elitist policies, the brutal confrontation with a forced modernisation induced by entry into the sphere of the capitalist mode of production, industrialisation, and information, as Escallier (1984) analyses, and as cited by Basset (1989), squared up Rabat to two modes of spatial organisation: the top-down planning from the colonial authorities on one hand, and the bottom-up reaction from the indigenous population on the other.

Santos (1975) argues that this is a natural consequence of the modernisation in underdeveloped countries. With the technical and scientific progress and the arrival of new products, new tastes spread, old tastes subsist, and the economic apparatus faces a bipolarisation that takes place on the same territory. Moreover, modernisation means the suppression of small tasks, and creates fewer competitive jobs in a context of an increasingly active population, most of which is poorly qualified or non-qualified. This leads inevitably to the inflation of unemployment as argued by Singer (1970) and cited by Santos (1975), and the coexistence of two circuits of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

In Rabat, while a new formal economy started taking hold in the centre of the city, the margins began witnessing a flourishing economy of resourcefulness: the informal economy. At the dawn of the 1920s, informality was born as a by-product of the colonial intrusion that pushed the indigenous Moroccan population to take responsibility of both housing and work away from the official unilateral urban regulations (Chouiki 2013).

3.3.3 *Rabat’s Souks During the Protectorate*

For Rabat’s *souks*, the implementation of the new urban plan and policies meant the beginning of an eventful cycle of life poorly documented. The existing literature does not specifically describe the way the open-air markets vanished, but analysis of the spatial changes induced in Rabat over time, gives informative cues about the implied consequences for these commercial structures. As discussed earlier, two types of *souks* are to be distinguished: intramural commercial strips of boutiques and open-air markets at the doors of the ramparts. While the former were well kept and preserved, the latter were subjected to various changes until they vanished, at least in their original form.

The *souks* within the *medina* have not remained totally unchanged either. The major changes linked to the new socio-economic system, the introduction of new products, the installation of new customers and the increase of traffic flow have increased the commercial dynamics inside and all around the *medina*. The function of the *souks* evolved over time and merchants had to change their commercial activity to keep up with the needs of the diverse population. New practices developed, but they remained contained within the same spatial organisation. Nevertheless, although



Fig. 3.4 Left: Souk El Ouassaa 1912, Right: Marché Central 1950- built over Souk El Ouassaa after the demolition of Bab Tben, part of the medina's rampart (Source Unknown photographers, Left: 1912, Right: 1950)

Prost assured the registration of all buildings and monuments with significant patrimonial value, some important inputs were induced to the old urban fabric to cope with the new commercial needs of the growing population.

Bab Tben at the end extremity of Mohammed V Street (Fig. 3.1; former Lgza Street) for example was destroyed to allow the construction of a new commercial structure: *Marché Central*. From our photographic evidence (Fig. 3.2), it is crystal clear that *Marché Central* was built on the open space called El Ouassaa where the livestock market was held daily. This market and the others described earlier in this chapter were seen as a chaotic, unsanitary, and disturbing activity by the Europeans (Kania and Kalaska 2019) (Fig. 3.4).

However, despite the obvious presence of itinerant trade in Rabat with all the urban dynamics and flows it generated, in addition to its social implications in the daily life of the indigenous population, the inclusion of this activity was completely overlooked and did not figure anywhere in Rabat's new master plan made by Prost. Policies designed in France for the European context were tested in Morocco without an effort of adaptation or participation from the locals. No spaces were designated to shelter the *souks* activity and keep them alive, nor were they converted or integrated into the new modern circuit. Even though several open spaces were designed in the downtown area, none of them was set aside for this already established commercial open-air activity. As a result, the peddlers and *souaka* of Souk el Had, Souk El Ouassaa, and Souk Leghzal were left to take responsibility for where to do business without official permission.

3.3.4 *Itinerant Trade After Independence—Until Today*

As a result of the coexistence of two urban planning models: the autochthon and the imported, and two urban evolution modes: the legal and illegal, the official and the parallel, Rabat's space was left chunked after the French settler left the country. After the independence, the continuity between the imported plan and the first Moroccan

master plan for Rabat (*Schema Directeur*) elaborated in the beginning of the 70s was appealing. In his study of the evolution of urban planning in Rabat, Basset (1989) points out the intriguing mimicry between the two plans and questions the reasons behind it. For him, Rabat's urban crisis was met by what he called therapeutic actions to treat the crisis' symptoms instead of its root causes. Since then, the interventions on Rabat's urban space have continued to be implemented on the same principles, never considering the original urban life before the imported urban concepts.

The informal economy and its actors were once again overlooked, and informality was—and is still—considered a gangrene to be eradicated. A vision that reflected the desire to submit everything to dominant state centralism, while informality remained nothing more than a liberal, spontaneous response to a centralised and over-regulated economy (Chouiki 2013).

Downtown Rabat has kept the same functions designed by the French administration until today. In terms of commercial structures, the *medina* has sustained its commercial dynamics, while all around it new mobility hubs developed. Over the years, the pedestrian and traffic flows increased, thus attracting more street vendors (Monnet 2007). With its historic and political power symbolically built and left by the French administration, downtown was considered an untouchable part of the city and street vendors were regularly faced with forced evictions.

And yet, the successive urban interventions in the downtown area after the independence accentuated its commercial attractiveness for both formal and informal sectors. In fact, various wholesale markets and trade fairs continued to take place around the *medina* in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, and then were moved without offering alternatives to absorb the ever-growing itinerant activity that developed in the surroundings (Fig. 3.5).

For a decade since 2011 we have led an observational, longitudinal study of the itinerant trade evolution in downtown Rabat for research purposes: reporting changes of the spatial patterns of street vending activity allowed, documenting the trends and turning points that characterised its dynamics in this specific area over the specified time interval. Our main purpose was to identify street vendors' location

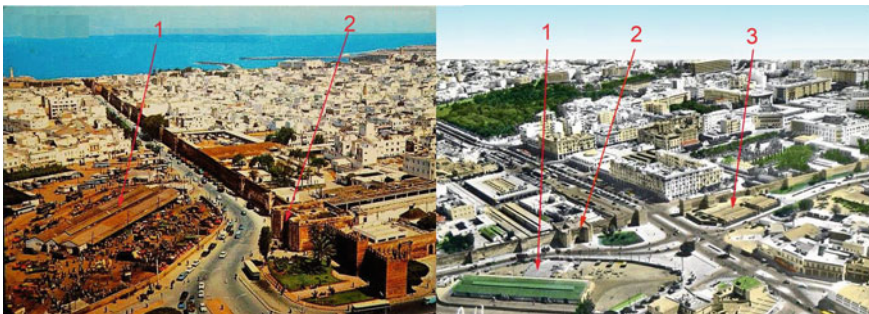


Fig. 3.5 Downtown wholesale markets in the 1970s. (1) Wholesale market (2) Bab El Had (3) Poultry market (*Source* Unknown photographers 1970)

preferences based on the spaces they would occupy the most. Being highly unstable and prone to change according to the ongoing political and economic conjuncture, it has been observed that street vending in downtown Rabat fluctuates through what seems to be perpetual cycles of prosperity, interrupted by disrupting events leading to tensions between vendors and authorities, followed by a regrouping phase and again, prosperity.

While it is interesting to study street vendors' movement during stressful times to understand resistance mechanisms, the spatial configuration during prosperity informs about the spaces that are propitious to itinerant trade when no pressure or exogenous variable is involved. The following map (Fig. 3.6) represents the specific spots in downtown Rabat that have drawn massive gatherings of street vendors during prosperous phases of the last decade.

A comparative map (Fig. 3.7) shows that itinerant trade did not disappear from the *medina* but rather flourished and expanded within its enclosure over time.

As shown on the map, today's street vendors of downtown Rabat favour spaces along the main commercial strips of the *medina*, namely Bd. Mohammed V, Souika Street and Boukroune Street, the sidewalks along the southern wall of the ramparts with significant clusters at the ramparts' portals and, interestingly, parking lots near *Marché Central* that was built over *Souk Teben-El Ouassaa* as explained earlier (Fig. 3.8) and at the *Bab El Had* portal (*Bab* being the Arabic equivalent of portal) where *Souk El Had*-Sunday Market used to be held (Fig. 3.9).



Fig. 3.6 Massive street vending areas within medina—downtown Rabat from 2011–2020



Fig. 3.7 Itinerant trade areas in the beginning of the protectorate (around 1912) and in the last decade (around 2011)



Fig. 3.8 The parking lot in front of Marché Central used by street vendors (Source Left: Unknown photographer 1950; Right: Taken by the author in 2011)



Fig. 3.9 Itinerant trade at the Bab El Had portal. From left to right: 1908, 1917, 2010 (Source Unknown photographers, 1908, 1917, 2010)

During the last decade, significant urban transformations have been conducted in downtown Rabat, primarily affecting mobility dynamics in the area. With several bus stops of major lines being created in the area, in addition to taxi ranks assuring the connection between Rabat and neighbouring cities and the implementation of the tram network, downtown Rabat became a hub where massive pedestrian and car flows met. The improved accessibility generated increased commercial value that is suitable to the prosperity of street vending (Monnet 2007). Not only the catchment area expanded, but also, more street vendors from distant neighbourhoods could easily access the area, which resulted in a rise in the number of vendors. However, and despite the visible magnitude of the activity, no official action was planned in response, other than the usual periodic evictions.

In fact, the initial commercial vocation of downtown Rabat before and during the protectorate had never been dethroned and kept increasing after independence and up until today. Street vending continued thus expanding inside and around the *medina* as shown in the following pictures (Fig. 3.10).

Today, street vending has been tremendously impacted by the pandemic and all vendors have been evicted from the downtown area to avoid gatherings. The current situation qualifies, thus, as a disturbed moment for itinerant trade in the area that opens up new questions about its uncertain future.



Fig. 3.10 Photos of different vending spots inside and around the Medina before the pandemic, 2018

3.4 Conclusion

The missing link between the original *souks* in downtown Rabat and today's street vendors lies in the history of the urban transformations Rabat underwent. When examined from a spatial point of view, regardless of the legal status, it can be concluded that itinerant trade has, in fact, never disappeared. It mutated over time and received different denominations, and, most paradoxically, turned from being a constitutive part of Rabat's downtown's history into an intrusive activity in the eyes of both policy makers and city users as observed in a former study we conducted on street vending in 2014. While peddlers were intentionally left behind and *souks* left to vanish during the protectorate, current policies seem to genuinely consider it as an intruder activity that disturbs Rabat's modernity. This calls for a reconsideration of the current orientation of planning that glorifies alien policies and laws to the detriment of the real needs of the population.

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