

# HOUSING, RACE AND GENDER IN 1930'S ALGIERS

SHERRY MCKAY

University of British Columbia

## Introduction

While questioning the existence of an "Islamic" city, Janet Abu-Lughod identifies gender and a consequent segregation of space as "perhaps the most important element of the structure of the city contributed by Islam."<sup>1</sup> In referring to European and specifically French culture, Ann Stoler has remarked that "sexual control was a fundamental class and racial marker in a wider set of relations of power."<sup>2</sup> Algiers is a particularly potent example of such spatial markings in the 1930s when, as the Algerian historian Marina Lazreg observes, "the struggle between indigenous cultural preservation and French intervention centered on women as ideological subjects... [where] Muslim and French mirrored each other."<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s, the municipal government of Algiers initiated proposals, competitions and a subsidized housing program which, for the first time, highlighted housing types devised specifically for indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> It was a significant decision preceded only by the most cursory discussions of this issue and perfunctory constructions in Algeria as a whole in the 1920s. While it might be understood as a response to population dislocation and the inordinate influx of indigenous people into the city (some 21,000 between 1926 and 1931), modernization (revitalization of the port and transport), and humanitarian concerns (sanitation and health), this interest in housing had embedded within it a spatial politics responsive to discourses of race and gender.<sup>5</sup>

During this period, architects were compelled to negotiate these categories that increasingly dominated colonial politics, not only among representatives of the French state but also among those of indigenous elites and reformers.<sup>6</sup> In what follows I will trace the intersection of architectural design with political exigency via a discussion of the housing devised for Berber and Arab Muslim populations in Algiers. I also want to register, by reference to contemporaneous European housing, that race and gender were formative influences here as well, and no less political. I will conclude with comments on how housing was used in this colonial city as a strategy of urban reorganization according to shifting political aims. So uncharted and unpredictable was the colonial terrain of the 1930s that even Le Corbusier had difficulty in assessing an appropriate architectural response. As one of his most ardent supporters in Algiers remarked, Le Corbusier's 1932 viaduct housing that proposed to accommodate indigenous and European equally and in

close proximity had "naively" assumed a stage of assimilation not yet reached.<sup>7</sup> The comment begs the question of the significance of "not yet" and "assimilation."

## Indigenous housing

Prior to the 1930s, indigenous people found their own housing where they could in the remnants of the old city which still retained vestiges of their culture. While not confined to any one area of Algiers, increasingly, new arrivals sought housing in the overcrowded Casbah, in the buildings of the Marine District vacated by repatriating Spanish and Italians; many more found shelter in the *bidonvilles*, shanty-towns, constructed on the residual lands of the city. Wealthier Muslims escaped to villas in the surrounding suburbs.<sup>8</sup> The colonial policy of assimilation had long eroded the indigenous city which had offered a dense network of filtered spaces in streets and houses, a succession of sequestered and more restricted spaces, from public to semi-public to private, in the interest of privacy and female modesty.<sup>9</sup> Assimilation had tended to privilege an urban practice that devalued culturally differentiated spaces in the interest of republican notions of equality and professional ideas of modernization.

However, by the 1930s the ideal of assimilation had become problematic for the French, unpopular, unsuccessful and finally contested by the indigenous. Municipal response in terms of housing was indecisive. In 1921, the newly formulated program of Habitations à Bon Marché designated one of four for indigenous people. It was a conventional apartment block planned for the lower limits of the Casbah, and its construction was delayed. Then, throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, a variety of housing types for indigenous people in Algiers and its immediate surroundings were proposed.<sup>10</sup> Back-to-back row houses of one room with appended courtyard were constructed at Staouéli, a commune near Algiers in 1929-30. Here 33 units were provided with basic services (WC, drinking water, drains and stove). No community buildings were included; it simply housed supplementary labor for the nearby European agricultural village.

In 1933 a complex of terraced houses, each of one or two rooms with walled court, screened exterior windows and roof patios was exhibited at the Architecture and Urbanism Exposition held in Algiers.<sup>11</sup> In the mid-1930s, a few more Habitations à Bon Marché were proposed. They were typically five stories with screened

exterior windows and a reduced number of apartments per landing, in the interest of privacy. A common room, one or two bedrooms, and a small balcony comprised their spatial amenity. While basic services, water and electricity, were provided, gas and laundries, deemed luxuries, were not. In 1935 a project for Habitations à Bon Marché was proposed for the Plateau Salembier.<sup>12</sup> It offered picturesque arrangements of individual, walled villas with poetic names like Dar-el-Kebire and multi-family blocks with commercial premises. A year later a complex of three somber blocks with small windows, blank end walls and “Moorish” cornice, were terraced into the steep slopes of a ravine.<sup>13</sup>

In 1936 the Algiers Cité Modern Exhibition committed a whole section to indigenous housing.<sup>14</sup> One submission offered an elaborate Cité Musulman of Beaux Arts diagonals and axial planning containing replicated complexes of courtyard houses, a series of tower blocks aligned with an arcaded central plaza and community buildings. Another proposed a Cité Indigène of courtyard complexes organized in a standardized orthogonal block system and articulated with decorative arched entranceways. A third project presented five- and six-story blocks with a market wedged within them. Another, aligned conventional apartment blocks with existing streets. A similar arrangement was developed for indigenous housing at La Boucle. In 1937 an extensive Cité Indigène offering 816 two-room units, each with a walled court partially covered for artisan work, was proposed for Maison Carrée, a largely industrial suburb of Algiers. By the middle of the decade, architectural, planning and municipal attention had been turned, however unresolved, toward housing the indigenous and their cultural difference.

### Housing race and gender

Although little was actually constructed, these housing complexes are revealing of the ways in which class, race and gender conditioned their design. They imported European ideas of housing according to class: (outdated) back-to-back housing for rural agricultural sites, basic row housing for urban artisans, multi-story blocks for the working class, more elaborate complexes with community infrastructure for the urban *petite bourgeoisie*, and urban villas for the middle classes. On the other hand, the segregation of indigenous from European is a clear indication of the application of racial categories and assumptions of difference. The room sizes and configuration, 4 meter by 5 meter rooms with an appended and equally scaled court, were based on a study commissioned by the Algerian government in 1932 to determine the “distinctive” spatial needs of indigenous people. The basic type of Habitations à Bon Marché was thus “adapted” for indigenous residents by the elimination of modern luxuries and the addition of screened windows and spaces for charcoal braziers.

Underpinning these proposals of the 1930s was the ideology of the *indigène évolué*, and the evolution of civilization generally. A belief in degrees of “evolution” justified the very basic level of amenity offered in rural housing. Although improved sanitation raised these dwellings above those found normally, their courtyards

remained inadequate in their provision of light and air, the rooms somber, poorly ventilated and the walls deficient in thermal protection.<sup>15</sup> An evolutionary stance was also supported in the 1933 terraced housing proposal which aimed to reference “ancestral habits,” in combining Muslim religious and cultural concerns with modern, European comfort and convenience. Views into the house were blocked by the raised positioning and screening of windows and an interior gallery, protected by a *moucharabieh*, was included as a replacement for the ‘traditional’ terrace of private houses. Kitchens were adapted to accommodate charcoal floor braziers (*Kamoun*), and, at the same time, were envisioned equipped with water, electricity, gas and WC. The housing was thus rendered appropriate to the degree to which the intended inhabitants were considered to have “evolved” towards French civilization. As the architect of this terrace complex stated the question for the architect was whether one designed for the present level of development or for a future assimilation.

One of the indicators of a lack of progress among the indigenous, according to this notion of evolution was the situation of women. Their curtailed movements, confining attire, restricted access to the public realm and inequality in matters of marriage, dowry and inheritance were considered predicated on antiquated religious beliefs and anachronistic traditions. French initiatives—educational reform programs and charity workshops, parliamentary debates on polygamy, wife repudiation and inheritance practices—were directed towards this perceived oppression of indigenous women. Contemporary debates reveal troubled and ambiguous attempts to deal with the roles assigned to women in Islamic society within the parameters of the “civilizing mission.”

One such fraught initiative was housing. The several *Cahiers* published in 1930, in connection with the celebrations of the Centenary of French occupation, relate the colonizing project to women and the home. One commented that “contact with our civilization ... has slowly led Arabs to renounce totally or partially their ancestral nomadic habits to become sedentary and this transformation of *l’habitat indigène* ... is very important for the social, economic and political future of Algeria.”<sup>16</sup> Women, often used as symbols of Muslim religion and social organization, played a major role in defining, according to Western precepts and political needs, the exotic or alternatively primitive aspects of Algerian culture. Veiled women and visually inscrutable spaces, impervious to the European gaze, still fascinated, and clearly informed some of the terraced complexes, but orientalist fantasies became conflicted ones in the 1930s.

At the same time, the dangers of such spaces and the culture which it supported were called into question. As one architectural critic expressed it: “the ‘Moorish’ house was closed, focused inward, conducive to reverie and inactivity, and hence inappropriate to Western culture which demanded instead a domestic space that was open, outward looking, turned toward social life and economic endeavor.”<sup>17</sup> The walled courts, screened and elevated windows, interior courts and galleries responded

to notions of female seclusion and both house and women became markers of racial difference among the French. They also became highly politicized markers, as one French representative clearly indicates: "As long as the miserable condition of the native woman is not improved, as long as endogamy causes Muslim society to close in on itself, the door to this society will open to outside influence only with difficulty. We can attempt rapprochement and fusion, but these efforts are liable to weaken, if not shatter, at the feet of this woman, unyielding and faithful guardian of the home, its traditions and, in a word, the preservation and conservation of the race."<sup>18</sup> However, just as significantly, this guardian of the home could also become a point of cultural identity among spokespersons for the indigenous community of Algiers during this period.

As much as these housing proposals bear the imprint of European interests they just as significantly bear the impress of their Algerian inhabitants. Housing in the 1930s bore the impress of two intersecting and unfolding discourses, those of the French and also those of the indigenous, the Algerians. An alternative understanding of home and urban life was also conveyed. Elected indigenous municipal officials had demanded housing appropriate to their customs.<sup>19</sup> Religious and political reformers will retain these demands in the context of wider national interests. Algerian feminist historian, Marina Lazier asks that women's lives not be subsumed under the homogenizing and unitary concept of "Muslim" and that we question the "religious paradigm" which has its origins in orientalism and evolutionary paradigms.<sup>20</sup> She asserts that the gender discrimination suffered by Algerian women was not completely foreign to the experience of European women. It should be remembered too that French women did not enjoy the same political rights that men did during this period, nor could they vote.

Despite their inferior numbers, far more French and European families were actually rehoused by the housing initiatives of the 1930s than were indigenous.<sup>21</sup> Private investors, developers and the government program of Habitations à Bon Marché and Habitations à Loyer Moyen provided modern apartments, of six or more stories, in Beaux Arts or modern styles. This housing possessed balconies, two orientations and all the amenities of gas, electricity and water, and were advertised as especially beneficial to women, easing their work day with simplified kitchens and communal laundries.<sup>22</sup> The housing built for Europeans in Algiers imitated that in France, it followed the same legislated guidelines and responded to similar expectations. In France the family was thought to play an important role in maintaining French cultural ascendancy among émigrés and immigrants.<sup>23</sup> One could argue that in Algiers, as in France, the creation of a domestic definition of what it was to be French was equally important in the formation of cultural identity. By 1940 "la femme au foyer" and idealizations of women as mothers, wives and daughters would be codified by Vichy and the legitimate family unit would be promoted as a basis for social stability.<sup>24</sup> Hence one reason for the importance of the differential required between housing built for Europeans ("evolved") and those for indigenous peoples ("evolving").

## Spatial politics and the city

While the re-housing of the indigenous population might appear a natural outcome of slum clearance and urban redevelopment, the racial segregation and physical removal it envisioned was not, nor was hygiene and modernization its only aim. A planning competition for Algiers held in 1936 had a design brief which projected a city with a population of 350,000 Europeans and 150,000 indigenous; the reverse of what in fact was the situation, but towards which the housing relocation worked.<sup>25</sup>

The housing reorganized and reclassified existing social relations among indigenous as worker, *petite bourgeois* and middle class, breaking old kinship and village ties. It also relegated them to peripheral sites and segregated zones. The back-to-back row houses built just outside Algiers were a direct repercussion of housing policies adopted by the city. They were endorsed by the prefect of Algiers and the Governor General as a remedy to the growing influx of indigenous into the city. They were deemed important in efforts to attach the *fellah* to his land and the artisan to his *métier*. In Algiers itself, housing for manual workers was intended to counter the growing number of shanty towns in Algiers, and was understood as "a first step in ridding the city of undesirables, ... an attraction to slum dwellers by its greater comfort and adaptation to the needs of the indigenous, only to be followed, if necessary, by coercive action."<sup>26</sup> As one architect involved in this urban reconfiguration stated, "all other urban problems depend upon the rehousing of indigenous populations for their solution."<sup>27</sup> Clearly, he also recognized that it was a political issue.

Most of the Habitations à Bon Marché in the 1930s were built to accommodate those displaced by urban redevelopment in the Marine District where Muslims, Spanish, Italians and French had intermingled.<sup>28</sup> The President of the Habitations à Bon Marché Office in Algiers remarked on: "the political exigencies of a policy of methodical replacement of the slums, this plague of modern times ... this mixing of cultures," making the political role of this redevelopment clear.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the Governor General of Algeria characterized this area as a "small bastard island, neither Moorish nor completely European."<sup>30</sup> The western housing that would replace this "illicit hybridity," would collect Europeans in the city center so as to maintain French advantage there. As one urbanist, influential in colonial matters, commented: "Housing and cities designed to attract and favor European citizens of the white race were needed to head off nationalist demands being made by indigenous peoples."<sup>31</sup>

## HOUSING NATIONALISM

There is underlying these designs for housing a desire to make clear distinctions between European and indigenous cultures based on racial and gender differences. These distinctions could and were used to formulate national characteristics as the decade progressed. Throughout the 1930s gender and race became increasingly highlighted as markers of national identity. French films, such as *Pépé le moko* warned of the dangers

of cohabitation, and *l'Occident* was remade in 1938 to demonstrate the impossibility of intermarriage, something it had promoted in its original release of a decade earlier.

For French citizens, the 1930s presented anxieties about what constituted true French identity. Such distress was provoked by rearmament and threats of another European war, rebellion within its Empire and political disunity at home. In Algeria, the cultural supports by which national identity might be assured were particularly strained. There were heightened fears about the possible assimilation of large numbers of indigenous people whose language was not French, their religion not Catholic, their race not Aryan. This fear was heightened by the Blum-Viollette Bill for Muslim citizenship proposed in 1936. It would, many argued, contravene a definition of the nation much heralded in parliamentary debates of the time — the nation as a unity prepared by a community of race, language, religion and habits which then forges a spiritual community.<sup>32</sup>

The same anxieties pervaded urban perceptions and criticisms that pointed to the debilitating effects of the interracial mixing then occurring in the Marine District.<sup>33</sup> The increasing uneasiness about an “enemy within” coincides with the growing interest in not only rooting the *fellah* to his distanced land and the indigenous laborer to his industrial location, but also Europeans to the city. Threatened from within by worker’s uprisings in the early 1930s, infiltrated by Algerian nationalists with the election of a Parti du peuple algérien delegate to the Algerian Assembly in 1939, French nationalist impulses were inflamed. Insecurity about national identity, exacerbated by a threat of war, perceived demographic decline, and moral degeneracy, threats from without and within, were reflected in the defensive structures built to house gender and race in Algiers. But also constructed by these defensive houses was an oppositional identity. While the French Senate debated the role of women in bringing western values to the indigenous family, Oulemas, indigenous politicians, and the masses opposed absorption into French culture.<sup>34</sup> Here too, indigenous and Algerian reformers called on language, religion and history as the basis for an ethnic nation upon which the political nation and its institutions would be based.<sup>35</sup>

It has been argued that nationalist impulses affect colonial policy; the image of the nation configures the physical and psychological world of the colony where the greater perceived threat to the nation the greater the concern for its borders.<sup>36</sup> Essential to the protection of those borders was not just military strength but also cultural practices. The family, one such cultural practice, was considered a key institution of cultural dissemination and control. Important to both anxieties about the fragility of those mental attitudes which kept one French in foreign contexts and to strategies of control and moral rearmament was the concept of milieu, of cultural surroundings. It was in the appropriate surroundings that the formation of a class of *décivilisés*, a group gone native, could be circumvented. Urban planning and architecture were important venues for creating this appropriate cultural surrounding. Family and especially women were given an important role in the maintaining of French culture and civilization. Housing was a vehicle

by which commitment to and identification with the invisible moral bonds by which cultural legitimacy and colonial divisions could be marked and maintained. In this, French practice mirrored those archaic practices they deemed so characteristic of the yet to evolve indigenous.

These examples point out how the walls of housing complexes, the physical marking of precincts became political boundaries, dividers of space along ethnic and gender lines for political purposes. The different architectural positions taken with respect to siting, degree of amenity and spatial planning facilitated specific political positions in the 1930s one being evolutionary and assimilation the other segregation and association.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, “The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19. (1957), p. 167.
- <sup>2</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “making empire respectable: the politics of race and sexual morality in 20th century colonial culture,” *American Ethnologist* 16:4 (1989), p. 635. See also Stoler, *The Education of Desire: Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Marina Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 96.
- <sup>4</sup> The research for this paper was undertaken in 1992 and 1996 with the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant and a University of British Columbia Research Grant. A discussion of these housing initiatives is found in *Chantiers nord-africains* (Algiers) 1929-1937. See particularly March 1935. The general development of the city is also discussed in René Lespès, “l’évolution des idées sur l’urbanisme algérois de 1830 à nos jours,” *Chantiers nord-africains* (Mar. 1933), pp. 247-62.
- <sup>5</sup> For figures on population growth in Algiers see Lexpès, “Les tendances de l’urbanisme moderne,” *Chantiers* (Apr. 1936), pp. 182-184. and L. Pierre Marie, “Les tendances de l’architecture moderne,” *Chantiers* (Apr. 1936), p. 201. For a general discussion of the architectural and urban development of Algiers see J.J. Deluz, *L’Urbanisme et l’Architecture d’Alger* (Algiers: Pierre Mardaga et l’Office des Publications Universitaires, 1988).
- <sup>6</sup> Mafoud Kaddache, *La Vie Politique d’Alger de 1919 à 1939*. (Algiers: SNED, 1970), pp. 153-54.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean Cotereau, “Un nouveau bombardement d’Alger: Destin d’Alger, l’heure d’urbanisme,” *Le Journal Général Travaux publics et Bâtiments*. (18 May 1934), p. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> René Lespès and Paul Messerschmitt, “La Ville, le Port, le Tourisme,” *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Apr. 1935), p. 178.
- <sup>9</sup> Abu-Lughod, “The Islamic City” 167. See also Cyrus Mechkat, “The Islamic city and the Western City: A Comparative Analysis,” in *The Middle East City: Ancient Traditions Confront a Modern World*, ed. Abdulaziz Y. Saqqaf. (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), pp. 25-41.
- <sup>10</sup> See *Chantiers nord-africains* 1929-36. The publication is renamed *Chantiers* in 1936 to 1937.
- <sup>11</sup> François Bienvenu, “L’habitable indigène et les quartiers musulmans,” *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Feb. 1933), p. 245.
- <sup>12</sup> Anon. “Une Cité Indigène va être créée au Plateau Salembier,” *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Nov. 1934), p. 849.

- <sup>13</sup> The completed complex, attributed to Preuilh, was illustrated in *Algeria* (1936), p. 989.
- <sup>14</sup> See note 4.
- <sup>15</sup> François Bienvenu, "Les cités indigènes futurs," *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Mar. 1933), p. 266.
- <sup>16</sup> Jean Mirante, "La France et les Oeuvres indigènes en Algérie," *Cahiers du Centenaire de l'Algérie*. (Algiers: Gouvernement Générale de l'Algérie, 1931) 35. All translation from the French is by the author.
- <sup>17</sup> Jean Cotereau, "La Maison Mauresque," *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Dec. 1930), pp. 533-602.
- <sup>18</sup> Octave Dupont, *L'Algérie du Centenaire* (Bordeaux: Cadoret, 1928) 46. Quoted in Winnifed Woodhull, "Unveiling Algeria," *Genders* 8. (Spring 1991), p. 117.
- <sup>19</sup> Kaddache, *La vie politique*, pp. 153-54.
- <sup>20</sup> Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, p. 13.
- <sup>21</sup> See note 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Lucienne Jean-Darrouy, "La Femme et la Ville Radieuse," *L'Echo d'Alger*. (5 Mar. 1933), p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over cultural identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 189.
- <sup>24</sup> Lebovics *True France*, pp. 171-177.
- <sup>25</sup> René Lespès, "Les Tendances de l'urbanisme modernisé, Exposition de la Cité Moderne, Urbanisme," *Chantiers nord-africains*. (Jan. 1936), p. 190.
- <sup>26</sup> Bienvenu, "les cités indigènes futures," p. 266.
- <sup>27</sup> Bienvenu, "les cités indigènes futures," p. 266.
- <sup>28</sup> J.C. "Urbanisme algéroise, l'agonie d'un quartier," *Chantiers nord-africains* (May 1932), pp. 379-94.
- <sup>29</sup> Lespès quotes the President of HBM, Pasquier-Bronde, in "La Ville, le Port le Tourisme," p. 178.
- <sup>30</sup> René Lespès, *Algerie 1937, Les arts et les techniques moderne.*, (Algiers, 1937), p. 15.
- <sup>31</sup> E. Vivier de Streel, "Introduction," *L'Urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux. Communications et rapports du Congrès international de l'urbanisme aux colonies et des pays tropicaux.* ed. Jean Royer (La Charité-sur-Loire: Deylance, 1932), p. 9.
- <sup>32</sup> Louis Millot, "Le Gouvernement de l'Algérie," *Cahiers du Centenaire de l'Algérie*. (Algiers: Gouvernement Général de l'Algérie, 1931).
- <sup>33</sup> J.C., "Urbanisme algérois: L'agonie d'un quartier," pp. 379-94.
- <sup>34</sup> See *Journal Officiel Débats Parlementaire*. Sénat (Mar. 1935).
- <sup>35</sup> Jean-Claude Vatin, *L'Algérie Politique, Histoire et Société*. (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1983), p. 196.
- <sup>36</sup> Ann Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (July 1992), pp. 124-151.