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The role of public spaces in achieving social integration in an Algerian city: The case of the city of Oum El Bouaghi

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ABSTRACT

The importance of public spaces in the organization of urban space, has been recognised by various urban actors within town planning policies towards providing various social groups across the urban tissue of the city. As the privileged space of social life, this allows meeting and integration between members of society. Many public spaces are spread over the entire urban area of the Algerian city of Oum El Bouaghi, which has seen an increase since the administrative upgrading of the city to the province siege in 1974. However, these neighbourhoods suffer from various problems. Problems that affected the failure to fulfill their fundamental and original role are examined in this study which focuses on the dynamics of existing public spaces. The urban pole of 'Macomadas', one of the recent large districts of the city of Oum El Bouaghi is chosen to understand its role in achieving social integration. This was achievable by relying on results of a questionnaire that was distributed to a population sample, which shed light on the need to pay attention to the participation of the population in public spaces in accordance with the customs and traditions in force in the city to achieve social integration.

KEY TERMS: public spaces, social integration, Algerian city, 'Macomadas' urban pole, Oum El Bouaghi

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INTRODUCTION

Increased urban population, has led to the emergence of many urban and social problems. The great role of public spaces requires providing appropriate spaces in residential neighborhoods in order to meet, communicate and provide comfort to the residents, in meeting the daily needs of the population. The city of Oum El Bouaghi is considered one of the medium cities located in the east of Algeria. Since its administrative promotion in 1974 it has been known to have an extended urban extension. However, continued city growth and the influx of new residents from outside the city and its outskirts, and absence of maintenance and attention by urban planning and social development authorities resulted in public spaces becoming prone to many urban problems. This study aims to highlight the role of public spaces in social communication and their necessity in residential neighborhoods, in addition to clarifying the role of urban planning in creating these spaces and their spatial distribution, especially in new residential neighborhoods, with an analysis of the causes that led to marginalization and neglect, shedding light on the neighborhood 'Macomadas', which represents a new urban pole in the city of Oum El Bouaghi. The study is divided into 6 interconnected and sequential sections. The first section is a background that interrogates urban extension in various directions in Algeria, in complemented by critiquing the spatial distribution of public spaces. The 2nd section is about the Unbalanced distribution of public spaces in the city of Oum El Bouaghi. The 3rd sections discuss the reality of public spaces in the city of Oum El Bouaghi. Various characteristics of public spaces in the urban pole 'Macomadas' are presented in the 4th section. And the 5th section analysis the role of public areas in the urban pole 'Macomadas' in achieving social integration. The final section sets out conclusions and implications.

BACKGROUND

In their evolutionary path cities have undergone many changes and transformations during. Various forms of expansion have resulted in increased cities size. Thus, successive urban policies varied in controlling their morphology and regulating their functions (Abdelli, 2018). The policy redesigns aimed to restore its role, identity, and functions. Redesigned in response to the perceptions of the population and their cultures. Taking into account all the human, cultural, and historical dimensions the city as a place for people to gather, and a place for meeting and communication between its various members (Driss, 2013).

Undeniably at a time when the population's need for housing has increasing, it is matched by the need for other areas that are no less important than the rest of the needs in an individual's life related to providing psychological comfort, social encounter, cultural exchange, and improving relations between different groups of society (Bachtarzi, Alkama, & Salah-Salah, 2021). This is especially the case for public areas that play this vital role as areas of convergence, gathering, entertainment, acquaintance, and social integration (Jalaladdini & Oktay, 2012).

Throughout history, the social dimension has played an important role in the emergence of cities. The first human groupings were a clear example that reflects the extent of the contribution of the social factor complemented by the economic factor, in the formation of the first of these groups. Such fields have been found in the city during the various stages of its development, and across human civilizations. The agora of the Greek city (De Sablet, 1988), the forum in the Roman city (Muret, Allain, & Sabrié, 1987) the mosque in the Arab Islamic city and squares in the contemporary city all are valid contextualization of this assertion. Public spaces are of great importance in the organization of the urban space. It is an indispensable structural element. However, it is a new a kind of marginalization and delaying the full social outlook achievement in the Algerian city. However, new policy aimed at solving various urban problems, through participation of various actors, primarily the population were adopted. Those who had the opportunity were afforded platforms to express their opinion by participating in the design, development, and management of their city according to their needs and requirements. Emphasis was placed on the necessity of paying attention to public domains and giving them priority within the various urban improvement programs to improve urban life (Semroud, 2009).

Henceforth in this study, we analyze the role of public spaces at Oum El Bouaghi city (Boumali, 2020), in achieving social integration. This city witnessed an extended urban expansion since its administrative promotion in 1974, when it became Oum El Bouaghi city. It benefited from multiple projects, residential and service, and acquired many public areas, parks, and squares distributed throughout. The city has become living an active urban dynamic resulting in many flows and capital accumulation, in various economic and social sectors. The article hence focuses on the urban pole 'Macomadas'. which represents the latest urban expansion in the city, and the largest urban area.

The importance of the location of the city of Oum El Bouaghi is evident from its geographical location in eastern Algeria. This represents a connection point between an important group of cities in the Algerian east. These include Constantine, Tebessa, Ain Al-Beida, Khenchela and Guelma. This contributes to creating

dynamism and vitality within the city. In addition, it constitutes a link between the North and the South. As well as between the border areas and the interior. This site is also supported by the presence of the railway linking the city of Ain Melila and Tebessa through the city of Oum El Bouaghi. It is located at the southern slopes of Mount Sidi Arghis (1635 m). Through the intersection of the two national roads No. 10, which connects it east of the city of Tebessa to the Algerian-Tunisian border. To the west, the city of Constantine, then the city of Setif, and other cities of the Algerian east. National Road No. 32, which connected it to the north with the city of Guelma, then Annaba, and to the south with the city of Khenchela.

In 1974 a national administrative division was completed whereby the city of Oum El Bouaghi was elevated to a *province*. In 1984, a second administrative division was carried out according to which the province's borders were reduced from the southeastern side, in favor of the new *province* of Khenchela, which was separated from it (Layeb, 1986).

The administrative upgrading of Oum El Bouaghi making it to be the capital of the province, is a real starting point for comprehensive growth and development in all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life. Because of collecting the population and providing housing for them in all its forms and patterns. This led to a continuous increase in the size of the city, which reached 67,201 people, according to the general census of population and housing for the year 2008. 75.3% of the total population of the municipality. due to the natural increase in population. As well as a result of immigration to the city from neighboring areas to obtain housing and work. To take advantage of the various services provided by the administrative upgrade. This is reflected in the spatial expansion of the city. By signing housing programs of different types and patterns to accommodate new residents and families. Settling the necessary equipment (educational, health, cultural), and the availability of lands in the city, especially on its southern side, contributed to this process. This accounts for expansion of the city of Oum El Bouaghi in terms of directions, and pace.

The city of Oum El Bouaghi's expansion was linked to the history of its inception. The expansion processes have been characterized by an accelerating dynamism in the last decades. And in different directions of the city, housing production has been dominated by absolute since its administrative upgrading. In addition to signing service equipment to meet the needs of the residents residing there. Given the importance of urban expansion in the city of Oum El Bouaghi, we studied its two clear phases. to compare between natural expansion (before 1974) and voluntary reconstruction (after 1974).

The first stage (before 1974), represented formation of the city's nucleus. as a colonial center with a European character in a unified geometric chess shape. This was endemic along National Road No. 10, in the form of small gatherings. There were also rural dwellings belonging to the local population in a linear way. Three periods can be distinguished at this stage:

- **1896-1920:** The first core of the city appeared along the National Road No. 10, extending from the old hospital from the west to the olive forest in the east. As for north to south, it extends from the feet of Mount Sidi Arghis in the north to the Christian cemetery in the south. This colonial core included two primary schools, a market, two churches, and a railway station, in addition to a fountain in the middle of this core, in which approximately 650 inhabitants lived. The administrative tower on its eastern side was also established for security and military purposes. During this period, the city occupies an area of 34 hectares. As for the houses, they were built of stone and roofed with tiles (Layeb, 1986).
- **The period 1921-1953:** urban expansion headed to the eastern side, with the emergence of several scattered traditional houses, and a gathering of chaotic and tin houses, which are called "the northern *dashrah*" on the northeastern side of the colonial core, and then the "southern *dashrah*" appeared on the south-western side, due to the severe rural exodus to the city, which led to an increase in its size, which reached 2,381 inhabitants in 1954. The housing construction material in this period varied from traditional houses built of stones, bricks and tiles, to chaotic and tin homes built with bricks and wood. and tin (Layeb, 1986).
- **The period 1954-1973:** The city of Oum El Bouaghi witnessed a sharp rural exodus due to the war of liberation, which continued after independence (1962). In 1966, the population of the city of Oum El Bouaghi reached 9,282 , with an estimated growth rate of 11.71%. The area of the city is estimated at 79 hectares, and this is at a growth rate of 1.03%, which means that the area of the city has increased over a period of 77 years by only 79 hectares.

The second stage (post 1974)

This stage is commensurate with the city status upgrading of state headquarters, which was an impetus for the

acceleration of the pace of urban expansion, as the city became an area for the implementation of many development programs and plans in which the housing sector takes priority. This stage can be divided into three periods, as follows:

- **1974-1984 period:** The city was upgraded to status of state headquarters in 1974, and this was accompanied by an increase in the size of projects in various sectors, especially the "housing sector", where the two *dachras* (northern and southern) were removed (Layeb, 1986, 1997) and nearly 3,350 collective-style houses and the emergence of completely new neighborhoods such as Hay al-Nasr and Hay Hihhi al-Makki, which form the new urban residential area " A ", and Hay Mustapha Benboulaid , of which a large part is the new urban residential area " C ". The urban modernization scheme of 1976 contributed managing the city and providing it with infrastructure services, in addition to the emergence of many allotment projects, such as the "Al-Naseem" allotment... and the signing of many educational and health facilities. In 1977, the population reached 15,123 people.
- **1985-1990 period:** Considered the most important period for the expansion of the city and the development of the number of housing in it. It witnessed a noticeable increase in the pace of housing projects, especially social housing projects, which aimed to provide the largest possible number of housings to alleviate the crisis that the city was experiencing in previous years due to severe rural displacement and rapid population growth after the administrative upgrade, the city of Oum El Bouaghi recorded rapid population growth linked mainly to administrative upgrade. As 34,257 people were counted, a growth rate equivalent to 8.43% annually during the decade 1977/1987.
- **The period after 1991:** This period witnessed major expansions, as construction operations became inside the city, to take on a cohesive urban tissue and take on the character of a city seat of a state, where nearly 4000 houses were completed between collective housing and individual housing, in addition to the establishment of several equipment to meet the needs of The population, as this period coincided with the implementation of the second five-year plan and the successive annual projects, of which the housing sector's share constituted a percentage ranging between 25.00 - 28.57%, and there was an increase in the number of allocations such as Hai Al-Nasr, Hai Bouaziz Said, Hai Ibn Al-Khattab, Al-Shorouk, Queen of Harakta , Afri , Gueram, Saada... (Mazouz, 2010), and the annual growth rate witnessed a slight decrease after 1998, after the population recorded during this year 47,835 people and rose to 67,201 in 2008, i.e. a growth rate that exceeds 3 %, which is also relatively higher than the estimated national growth rate during the last period, which is in the range of 2.5 %.

METHODOLOGY

The research was interested in clarifying the level of social integration in the public places of the city of Oum El Bouaghi and highlighting the essential role of these multiple and diverse places that allow the need to develop effective urban plans for their development in a thoughtful manner to achieve their sufficiency and efficiency at the level of the city of Oum El Bouaghi as a whole and specifically in the urban pole 'Macomadas' in particular, and for this reason, we relied on a set of theoretical references derived from books, research, and studies to collect data and information related to the research topic, the field of research, and its objectives. To answer 90 main questions, divided into 30 groups, related to the extent of perception and use of public spaces according to the different age groups in the family, as well as according to the cultural, social, and professional levels.

Field observation was also used and recorded as part of the data collection process, especially with regard to the times of residents' visits to public places.

In addition to using some tactical methods to analyze the contribution of public spaces to achieving the social integration of the population, and to obtain accurate results in the research.

The researcher was keen to adhere to the accuracy of the data and to emphasize its secrets to the respondents who expressed their desire to make extensive use of floating places in order to achieve social integration in the urban pole 'Makomadas'.

Unbalanced distribution of public spaces

The spatial distribution of public areas in Oum El Bouaghi is characterized by variation across its urban tissue. The colonial core of the city includes a few of them due to the limited area occupied by European-style housing and some commercial activities and services, which helped in the presence of some unprepared empty spaces such as the untapped olive forest, As for the individual-style residential neighborhoods located south of the colonial

core, there are no prepared public areas except for the presence of some unprepared green spaces, and in the far north of the city, where the residential neighborhoods of a collective style are interspersed with empty unprepared spaces, and trees are lined up along the structured roads that witness dense mechanical movement, which made the presence of public areas in it very few despite the high percentage of empty and wooded spaces in them. As for the residential neighborhoods with a collective character, they belong to the new urban residential area, which are structured within two important axes around which many service facilities are lined up, It occupies important public spaces but is in a state of complete neglect, especially with regard to children playing spaces and green spaces, while on the northwestern side of the city, in which the second new urban residential area is located, there are many public spaces, but they are not equipped, despite their proximity to the University of "Larbi Ben M'hidi", and on the southwestern side of the city, where the houses of collective and individual styles are spread. It has many public areas, especially children's playing spaces. In order to identify the centrality of public spaces in the city of Oum El Bouaghi and to propose solutions to these problems to activate the social aspect of them and achieve social communication by putting a good preparation on the urban pole "Macomadas", which was studied, taking into account the social and cultural nature of the city and the region.

Characteristics of public spaces in the urban pole 'Macomadas'

Macomadas urban pole is one of the housing programs implemented within the framework of the five-year program 2005-2009, the largest housing project that the municipality of Oum El Bouaghi benefited from. It consists 2,200 social co-operative housing and 10 individual housing units, which is participative and individual housing, implemented within the framework of residential areas New urban "ZHUN".

The public spaces in the urban pole 'Macomadas' are represented in the structured road network, consisting primary roads with an estimated area of 6 hectares, or 44%, secondary roads with an estimated area of 5 hectares, or 36%, and tertiary roads with an estimated area of 2 hectares, i.e. 18%, in addition to the pedestrian paths and sidewalks, the latter of which is unprepared, lacks afforestation and furnishing, and is unpaved and accumulating urban waste, and this poses difficulties for pedestrians. As for parking lots, they are known to be completely absent in the urban pole "Macomadas", and this pole is also linked to the technical networks represented in the drinking water supply network, which is in good condition and the coverage rate reached 100%, and the sewage network covers the area by 100%, but it suffers from the lack of sewers.

With regard to the squares, they are represented in one public square, which is a place dedicated to rest, meeting and social communication, but it suffers from the absence of urban preparation and furnishing and lacks all amenities, and there are playing spaces represented by two playgrounds, which are not enough.

Public spaces influence in the urban pole 'Macomadas' in social integration achievement

From the results of the questionnaire distributed in November 2019 to a random sample of 10% of the number of families residing in the urban pole, confirmed that there is a contrast in its social structure in terms of its age groups, which are dominated by the two age groups 18-30 years and 30-54 years, at a rate of 31% and 35% respectively, as well as the proportion of males estimated at 54%. However, all answers agree in their use of the public areas in their place of residence, and the reason for this is that these areas represent for them an area for meeting and social communication between them, especially since 68% of the population have relatives in the neighborhood; they communicate with each other through these areas, especially the male category, which uses it the most.

In addition, from study sample results respondents indicated the population relies on the public spaces to sit and play at a close rate of 52% and 63%, respectively, while passing and standing with someone represents a small percentage, and this indicator shows the effective role it plays in achieving integration and social communication, which calls for attention and promotion, This is supported if we know that 20% of the population are university graduates, 36% are from the secondary level, 36% are from the intermediate level, and 08% are from the primary level. Here it becomes clear that there is homogeneity in the educational level that can result in social homogeneity and a greatest possibility of social communication.

As for the times of accessing public areas, most of the population represented by 52% prefers to go out to public areas in the evening, 30% prefer the afternoon, and 08% at night, while in the morning there is a percentage of 10%. The reason for the high percentage of the evening shift is that this period represents times after work and study, as it is the period of rest and exchange of visits and meetings, where 38% spend one hour, another 32% spend two hours, and 18% three hours, and 12% spend less than an hour. The higher the period of stay in the public domains, the more this indicates an increase in the full connection with these domains, at a time when 70% of the population records a feeling of safety in the public spaces.

Almost complete unanimity was recorded in the residents' desire to participate in the managing of the existing public spaces, which suggests the possibility of raising and improving the level of management on the one hand and the extent of the importance of public areas in their lives in the urban pole 'Macomadas'.

CONCLUSIONS

Public spaces contribute to playing an important social role among the various members of the city community as a place for meeting and acquaintance, as it is the appropriate place to achieve social integration, in addition to its role in organizing the urban space. There are many urban public areas in the city of Oum El Bouaghi with an unbalanced distribution between the various neighborhoods of the city, and the multiple problems it suffers from have hampered them from not performing the role assigned to them. The urban pole 'Macomadas' includes many public areas that attracted different categories of its residents at different times of the day, especially in the evening period, which represents the appropriate time outside work and study times to spend leisure time and meet between different social groups for dialogue, exchange of ideas and achieving integration and communication.

Implications

The study reached a set of important results related to marginalization and neglect in all its forms, in addition to the poor spatial distribution and the absence of preparation projects in them, due to the lack of participation of the population in all planning processes for these spaces and taking their opinions and perceptions that fit their customs, traditions and cultures in order to be able to achieve its main role with different actors. The social role of public spaces in the city of Oum El Bouaghi was absent for most groups in society. As for women, they can only use these public spaces and socialize with each other at specific times of the weekend with the whole family, while children are found frequenting these spaces almost every day to play. at certain times of the day, most often in the evening, while young people use public spaces at indefinite times related to their social and economic conditions to spend their free time commensurate with the inappropriate layout of these public spaces.

CONCLUSION

What distinguishes the public spaces in the urban pole 'Macomadas' in Oum El Bouaghi city is the almost complete absence of preparation processes, and given the importance that these areas show in the urban life of the population, it made them feel the need to involve themselves in all urban planning processes for these areas and take their opinions and perceptions that fit their customs, traditions, and cultures in preparing these areas to be able From achieving its main role of social integration among them in the urban pole 'Macomadas'.

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